

Hills of Headwaters Collaborative secures OHT status

Written by MIKE BAKER

A group of local health care professionals and service providers have been selected to help pioneer the provincial government's vision for a revamped health care system across Ontario.

In an announcement on Dec. 6, it was revealed that the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative has been successful with its application to become an Ontario Health Team. In attendance at the Dufferin County Paramedic Service base in Orangeville, Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones noted the local Collaborative is one of the first 24 teams to be approved under the new model.

"I know how hard the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative Health Team has worked towards the goal of becoming an OHT," Ms. Jones, currently Ontario's Solicitor General, said. "We began with an excellent foundation of collaboration in our community, between all the services who provide patient care, and we will continue to build on our experiences to improve patient outcomes."

In total, 36 different health care-related agencies as well as numerous local family physicians, have come together to form this new Collaborative. According to Ms. Jones, this new model will better connect patients and health care and service providers in our community. Through the new OHT model, she adds, patients will experience easier transitions from one provider to another.

The move was initiated by Ontario Health Minister Christine Elliott last February, when she announced plans to develop a new super-agency called Ontario Health, which will effectively consolidate the 14 Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) operating across the province, as well as other provincial agencies such as Cancer Care Ontario, eHealth Ontario, and Trillium Gift of Life Network. While Minister Elliott stressed at the time that this move "is not a financial exercise", it is expected to save the Province approximately \$200 million annually by 2021.

In her message to residents of the Hills of Headwaters region, Minister Elliott promised the formation of a local Ontario Health Team would be a game-changer for those who need to access health care services in the area.

"This is an exciting time for health care in Ontario as we finally break down the long-standing barriers that have prevented care providers from working directly with each other to support patients throughout their health care journey," Minister Elliott said. "Together, with our health care partners, the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative Ontario Health Team will play an essential role in delivering on our commitment to end hallway health care, and building a connected and sustainable public health care system centred on the needs of patients."

Minister Elliott believes the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative will create a local health care system that provides coordinated care for patients, reduces wait times and will lead to better health outcomes for patient.

"With our new Hills of Headwaters Collaborative OHT, patients will benefit from better integrated health care, with a seamless experience when moving between different health care services, providers and settings," Minister Elliott concluded.

Organizations such as Headwaters Health Care Centre (HHCC), Dufferin Area Family Health Team, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, Caledon Community Services, Dufferin Child and Family Services, Bethell Hospice and the Canadian Mental Health Association of Peel Dufferin have come together to help form the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative.

Through the group's many meetings and discussions in recent months, three key priorities have been identified to help improve health care services in Dufferin and Caledon. Those include improving integration of mental health and addictions services to expand access across our community and improve care, creating an integrated palliative care team, and enhancing services and programs for individuals with complex health care needs, who are currently seeing and dealing with multiple organizations and agencies.

Addressing a group of approximately 50 individuals on Friday, co-chairs of the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative, Kim Delahunt (President and CEO of Headwaters Health Care Centre) and Lianne Barbour (Executive Director of the Dufferin Area Family Health Team) congratulated those in attendance for their work in helping our region secure OHT status.

“We really began this journey back in the spring, when Minister Elliott came out to meet with us, and we talked about new ways we could all work together, and new ways we could move forward,” Ms. Barbour stated. “From there, we worked on developing a symposium that brought over 100 patients, physicians and service providers together in one room. It was the first of its kind here in Dufferin County and Caledon. It brought together folks to provide their input, and helped us create a shared vision for the future.”

She added, “We talked honestly about what it would take to get to where we are today. Well, today, I’m proud to say that we did it. We are here. We will be blazing a new trail, and with that will come opportunities and challenges. We know we have a lot of work to do, as patients, families and health care professionals collaborate and co-design to best serve the needs of people in our area.”

Work is already underway to develop a “year one plan”, Ms. Delahunt said. She explained how the details within that plan will be formulated through input by all members and agencies involved in the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative. She credited the togetherness of that local group with helping Headwaters secure OHT status.

“The beauty of Dufferin-Caledon is in the relationships that people have with one another here. Everyone has the ability to pick up the phone and come up with solutions to complicated situations as they arise. Finding solutions starts with relationships, and the trust that has been built with all partners in this region,” Ms. Delahunt told the Free Press. “We are fortunate to have 38 organizations, many physicians, and patient care providers as a part of our Collaborative. This number will grow as we move along this new health care journey. All in all, this is a very exciting time for us. The work that has been going on here, in all corners of the health and service sector, has been extraordinary.”

Minister Jones reserved special praise for Stacey Daub, the former President and CEO at HHCC. Ms. Daub served as co-chair of the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative from its creation in March up until her departure in early October. Ms. Jones says she was “pivotal” in bringing together all of the unique organizations in our region, and worked quickly and efficiently to put together a quality proposal, one that Minister Elliott couldn’t really turn down.

As one of the family physicians who have been involved extensively with the local Collaboration throughout this entire process, Dr. Amy Catania offered her thoughts on the potential changes this new move will bring to our community.

“The vision of an OHT is very exciting. There are so many redundancies, silos and many, many doors to our health care system. They are numerous, very complicated, and make it difficult for our patients to navigate,” Dr. Catania said. “The commitment to one local team across Dufferin-Caledon, with one vision, working toward the same purpose to ensure we can collectively and seamlessly support the wellbeing of our patients throughout the entirety of their care journey, is the right commitment.”

She added, “In the past, we were passively informed about the different changes and commitments (made by the provincial government). Over the course of the last weeks and months, we’ve been involved in parts of these changes that we weren’t part of before. The most exciting part is to be so actively involved individually, and collectively (as family physicians) in a movement to change our community. We can really see how this commitment to change will lead to better care for our patients.”

That was a sentiment shared by Dufferin County Paramedic Chief Tom Reid. Following an extensive, 30-plus-year career in Dufferin County, Mr. Reid noted the work he has seen take place, and he himself has been a part of, through this Hills of Headwaters Collaborative, has been unlike anything he had experienced before.

“Over my long tenure here, I’ve been involved in a lot of things in the health care sector for a long, long time. I’ve seen a lot of ideas, and a lot of strategies. I believe this community has always been successful, and will continue to be successful. We’ve been extremely resourceful, in the sense of getting things done in whatever way we needed to do it, and I think we’re going to do that

again,? Mr. Reid said. ?It doesn't matter whether it's caring hands, boots on the ground, health and service leaders, or the whole community. We understand the importance of this work and how the work we do is going to make a difference every day in supporting those who are vulnerable.?

He concluded, ?The road ahead is going to be tough. This isn't going to be easy, we're going to have to roll our sleeves up and get to work. But, we need to remember what got us here ? teamwork, courage, and our charm. We are one community working together, so fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a great ride, and I know we got this.?