

Local hospital has 13% staff vacancy rate, says CEO

By JAMES MATTHEWS, LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Editor's note: During Headwater Health Care Centre CEO Kim Delahunt's presentation to Mono council, she said the hospital currently has a 25 per cent staff vacancy rate. The hospital has clarified that the actual figure is 13 per cent with a nurse vacancy rate of 18 per cent. This figure has been changed from 25 to 13 per cent in the story.

Kim Delahunt said Headwaters Health Care Centre in Orangeville had another unprecedented year in 2022.

Delahunt, the hospital's CEO, described some of the hurdles and accomplishments to Mono town council on Tuesday (Dec. 13). And she spoke about some of the goals for the future.

Jennifer Hamilton, director of communications and stakeholder engagement at the hospital, and Tom Reid, chief paramedic at Dufferin Paramedic Services, were also on hand during the presentation.

"I cannot stress how proud I am of the team here at Headwaters who continue to show up each and every day with a smile on their face, ready to serve our patients and families," Delahunt said.

Then, later: "We are in a very good place, currently."

That's despite a current 13 per cent vacancy rate among staff at the hospital.

Councillor Ralph Manktelow, a retired surgeon, asked about any staff shortages at Headwaters. He said it's a problem shared by many health care facilities.

"The hardest areas to recruit into right now are pretty common across all hospitals, and those are the specialized nursing areas," Delahunt said.

Among those, she said, are Emergency Department nurses and those who work in intensive care units, obstetrics, and operating rooms.

Part of the challenge to recruit for those floors is the extra training required to qualify for those jobs, she said.

At Headwaters, they're looking internally for experienced nurses interested in availing of more training to be able to nurse in those specialized wards.

"We are leveraging all those opportunities," she said, and added they've recruited a handful of international nurses to work in Orangeville.

"We're in a decent place at Headwaters," Delahunt said. "Our team has worked very, very hard."

Manktelow asked if she could quantify the staff vacancy at the hospital with a specific percentage.

"Overall, we have about a [13] per cent vacancy rate, primarily in nursing," Delahunt said. "It varies by department, what that percentage is, and I don't know those off-hand. I apologize. I just know the big number."

"It sounds high, but it is in line with the provincial rate, unfortunately. So we're not any different than other hospitals."

Headwaters uses agency staff when required. Those are nurses from agencies that charge high rates for temporary staffing.

‘We’re trying to decrease our reliance on that,’ she said. ‘We certainly want to have our own staff and support them.’

Manktelow asked if Headwaters has had to close its Emergency Department in the last year.

‘We had one 12-hour closure in the summer, at the peak when our staffing was at an all-time low,’ Delahunt said. ‘The most acute, life-threatening [patients], we were still taking. Just anyone that was non-life-threatening, we had to turn away for a 12-hour period.’

Deputy Mayor Fred Nix said many health care facilities throughout Ontario and, indeed, the country have been inundated with pediatric patients this fall. Hospitals have had to take drastic measures to handle increased patient loads of children with respiratory ailments.

‘We are holding our own each and every day, which is great,’ Delahunt said. ‘We have had a few days where there were quite a few children in the Emergency Department.’

‘There was one day a few weeks ago where there were seven waiting to be admitted. Typically on every day there are four or five, but we are staffed up currently.’

The hospital saw 38,343 emergency room visits, performed 348,101 lab tests, including the COVID-19 nasal swabs, and 76,048 diagnostic imaging tests from March 2021 to March 2022. There were also 920 babies delivered at the hospital and 4,047 day surgeries during the same period.

‘We’re really proud of the work that continues to happen at Headwaters each and every year,’ Delahunt said.

A plan for foundational renewal at Headwaters will be set by updating the clinical priority plan, which is a clinical action plan that identifies priorities and areas of focus at the hospital for the next five years. It describes the directions hospital-wide to achieve those goals.

The plan outlines decision processes for individual programs and services at the facility and includes data from community-wide surveys.

‘It’s really about what we need to be doing to ensure we’re continuing to serve the growth in our communities and the population that Headwaters services,’ Delahunt said.

The hospital received feedback from more than 1,000 stakeholders internally at the facility and externally from the public and community partners.

The two population groups with the largest growth in Dufferin County are people 65 years old and older and people who are between 20 and 29 years old. Delahunt said those groups are growing faster in Dufferin than the provincial average.

‘It’s a pretty key statistic for us to focus on to ensure that we’re planning for those 65-plus,’ she said. ‘Focusing on geriatric programs and services and also ensuring that we’ve got programs and services for the younger (patients) and the new families moving into our area.’

The hospital will continue its focus on wait lists for diagnostic imaging and elective surgeries, clinical priorities planning, the strategic plan renewal, and work toward future renovations in the Emergency Department and the dialysis unit.

‘Due to numerous starts and stops throughout the past few years with the pandemic, our waitlist grew,’ Delahunt said.