

New executive director at Hills of Headwaters works to streamline health care access across Dufferin/Caledon]



Written By **Sam Odrowski**

There's a new leadership role at a local organization focused on providing excellent, integrated health and social care to people living in Dufferin/Caledon.

The Hills of Headwaters Collaborative (HOHC) Ontario Health Team (OHT) recently hired its first executive director and "easy" is the main word that she wants patients to associate with accessing services through the organization.

Tracy Coffin, who became executive director in September, is familiar with many obstacles people might face when going through the health care system. One of her daughters had significant medical challenges growing up, receiving 13 surgeries through pediatric care, and the other was in a serious motor vehicle accident and used the health care system for many years after.

Coffin is also the primary caregiver for both her parents with dementia.

"I'm not just somebody who works in health care, I'm an expert user of the health care system," she explained. "That's probably the main thing that drives me in all of this, making a system that's easy for everyone, including myself, including my loved ones."

Coffin's experience utilizing health services helps her identify potential gaps in services and areas that need improvement. It also fuels her passion for improving the coordination of care and services for patients and their families in Dufferin/Caledon.

Another unique perspective that Coffin brings to the HOHC OHT is her experience working for the National Health Service (NHS) in England for six years.

‘I learned a great deal about how the health system works in England and knew that it was ahead of the health system here in Canada, just in the fact that it’s been around a bit longer, it’s more established, it’s a national system,’ she said. ‘So what I really wanted to do was, when I returned to Canada? take those experiences, the knowledge that I gained through that, and use it here in Ontario.’

Coffin said she’s excited about her new role as it’s an opportunity to make progress on the health system at a local level and better connect people to the services they need.

‘I’ve worked in healthcare for 15 years now or I worked in social care for 20 years, and I think probably the most rewarding thing for me is with those two experiences, I’m able to bridge the gap and almost act as a liaison between all the partners at the table,’ said Coffin. ‘Because often in OHTs, you’ve got the health care people, then you’ve got the social care people, so bringing them together and helping them understand what each other does is important. I think the thing I am most proud of and happy with is that we’ve already started to strengthen those ties.’

She told the Citizen one key area of focus for the HOHC OHT is palliative care, providing quality support to people with complex medical issues as well as their families.

Another priority for the organization is making sure people are getting the right care at the right time.

‘The perfect example is somebody who is more senior, plus 80 years old, them being in the hospital receiving maintenance care is not the best place for them to be. We know seniors do much better if they’re in their own home, in their own community, and able to have services brought to them,’ said Coffin.

Improving mental health and addiction support is also a priority for the HOHC OHT, she noted.

‘Mental health is not just about those people that show up at the hospital,’ Coffin said. ‘It’s about the whole community at large. How do we improve the mental health and the availability [of services] for people when they need them?’

Data shows that many of the people who have mental health-related Emergency Room (ER) visits have accessed services in the community beforehand and the HOHC OHT is trying to build upon that to reduce ER visits, Coffin told the Citizen.

‘We want to make sure the right services are in place in the community so they never have to show up at the hospital,’ she said.

In hospitals across Ontario and many parts of the world, there is currently a human resource issue and Coffin noted that the HOHC OHT is working on strategies to attract and retain good health care workers locally.

‘Caledon and Dufferin are great places to live and work, and we want to make sure that we tell people about that and get them to come work with us,’ she explained. ‘We’re trying to do some work to set ourselves apart to create a value proposition.’

Meanwhile, the HOHC OHT is getting input from community members patients and caregivers to guide its strategic plan and focus over the next five years.

‘We have a lot of ambitious plans around making sure that integrated care is a reality so that anyone that needs health care receives it in an integrated, joined-up way, so they’re not having to run from place to place, we’re doing that for them. We’re making that seamless and making that easy for them,’ said Coffin.

Going forward, she told the Citizen her work will be focused on maintaining, strengthening and growing partnerships in health and social care to provide services to the community in a more integrated way.