

Fill the Gaps Closer to Home

Improving Access to Services for Rural Ontario

ROMA has issued a comprehensive report focused on improving access to health and social services in rural areas. The report builds on ROMA's 2022 study, *Opportunities for Rural Ontario in a Post-COVID World*, which focused on rural growth and resiliency. This study identified equitable access to services as a key theme.

Developed through extensive consultation, ROMA's *Fill the Gaps Closer to Home* report conveys the desperation shared by many residents and local leaders in health care, community services and municipal government.

While health care is a provincial responsibility, it is a critical priority for municipal governments – particularly because rural municipal governments often deal with the costly social and economic consequences of Ontario's health care crisis in their own communities.

For rural Ontario, the cost alone is over \$480 million in contributions to health and social service programs. With fewer households and businesses, rural property taxes cannot be expected to subsidize provincial costs to this degree.

Rural Ontario is different, bearing a disproportionate burden of the Ontario-wide health care crisis

- **Acute lack of primary care:** An estimated 525,000 rural residents do not have access to primary care. The number of people without access is growing four times faster than urban areas.
- **Emergency department (ED) closures:** In both 2022 and 2023, there were more than 600 temporary ED closures – a phenomenon that hits rural Ontario harder and more often. When a rural ED closes, the next available hospital can be hours away.
- **Scarce mental health and addictions services:** People experiencing these illnesses in rural Ontario face a daunting challenge, as access to services is limited to non-existent. In fact, 65% of municipal representatives surveyed said residents don't have access to walk-in clinics. And 60% also said that their community lacked mental health and addictions support.
- **Shortage of health care workers:** The shortage of professional health care workers is felt most deeply in rural areas. Rural doctors carry heavy patient loads – it can take three new doctors to fill the gap of just one retiree.

Health services must be delivered closer to home

- The priority must be on fixing the primary care crisis, including creating new and integrated models to deploy health care providers more effectively in rural areas.
- Immediate solutions are needed to expand and accelerate the number of health care professionals graduating from post-secondary.
- ROMA is urging the Province to make full use of the scope of practice for nurses, nurse practitioners and paramedics, to fill gaps closer to home.
- Rural communities are finding creative ways to use community paramedicine to fill local needs quickly. Community paramedicine has potential to support a broad range of health care challenges, from long-term care to mental health and homelessness. A more integrated, 100% provincially funded, approach for community paramedicine as part of the continuum of care is needed.
- Protect and properly fund public health emergency response and prevention programs in rural Ontario.

Rural municipal governments must have a seat at their Ontario Health Team tables.

- Despite \$481 million in contributions to operating and/or funding long-term care, paramedics and public health, only 10% of municipal survey respondents said their local Ontario Health Team had meaningfully engaged them.
- Rural municipal services impact the social determinants of health that are critical to understanding community health-care needs. Economic development, community housing, safe streets, recreation, and much more are the foundation to community health and well-being.
- Ontario Health Teams must have provincial funding and support to redefine health-care delivery:
 - » Shift demand from emergency departments to more appropriate forms of care, including investing in an integrated, full range of community care.
 - » Address social determinants of health through inter-professional collaboration.
 - » Support and fund community-focused innovation.

The ROMA report demonstrates the urgent need for a different approach to health service design, delivery and funding in Rural Ontario.

Using the Province's traditional top-down approach, implementation of new ideas will fail. The Province must defy convention and use the policy, regulatory and fiscal tools at its disposal in new ways. Only then, will rural Ontarians see an integrated health care system that delivers real access to health services. The required transformation should start today.