

**Association of Family Health Teams of Ontario (AFHTO)
2024 Budget Submission**

Primary Care

The Foundation of
the Healthcare System

#ItTakesATeam



Team-based primary care models offer all Ontarians comprehensive, coordinated and continuous care. These models are foundational to Ontario's health care system and ensure equitable care is delivered to those who need it most.

Ontario is facing a significant crisis in primary care. There is currently a shortage of family physicians and other primary care providers, leaving 2.3 million Ontarians without a family doctor in 2023. This number could grow to 4.4 million Ontarians by 2026 if further action isn't taken. In addition, only 25% of Ontarians have access to team-based primary care.

In a team-based model, family physicians and nurse practitioners work alongside nurses, dietitians, social workers, pharmacists and other health care providers to provide care that is seamless and connected. These teams provide programs and services that keep communities healthy. Team-based primary care – whether it's a Family Health Team (FHT), Nurse Practitioner Led Clinic (NPLC), Community Health Centre (CHC), or other interprofessional model of primary care – is comprehensive primary care provided by a team that improves the patient experience, patient outcomes and how Ontarians access care.

In a team-based model, Ontarians can be confident they will get access to the comprehensive, coordinated and continuous care they need even if the doctor is not available. These models also benefit primary care providers, providing a supportive and appealing work environment for new health care workers looking to practice primary care in Ontario, as well as existing providers who would benefit from the support offered by a team. Ensuring access to comprehensive and coordinated care through team-based primary care is an investment in a better and more connected health care system – with healthier patients, less hospitalizations and lower health system costs. comprehensive and coordinated care through team-based primary care is an investment in a better and more connected health care system – with healthier patients, less hospitalizations and lower health system costs.

In 2023, we welcomed the Ontario government's commitment of \$60 million over two years to expand existing teams and create up to 18 new primary care teams. This investment, as well as the government's continued commitment to Ontario Health Teams (OHTs), is essential to connecting more patients to interprofessional care teams across the province - including vulnerable and marginalized individuals – and to help keep patients out of emergency departments.

This investment is a critical step forward. Team-based primary care, such as FHTs, NPLCs, and CHCs, are foundational to successful implementation of OHTs. We cannot lose momentum to bring together coordinated and integrated primary care for Ontarians.

The Association of Family Health Teams of Ontario (AFHTO) is a not-for-profit association that supports interprofessional primary health care. We envision a health care system where every Ontarian will have access to high-quality, comprehensive, cost effective, integrated interprofessional primary care, leading to better health outcomes for patients and the communities in which they live while reducing the burden on hospitals and emergency departments across the province. To support this, we are proposing five recommendations that will be essential to delivering care to Ontarians.

The **Association of Family Health Teams of Ontario** (AFHTO) is a not-for-profit association that supports interprofessional primary health care. We envision a healthcare system where every Ontarian will have access to high-quality, comprehensive, well-integrated interprofessional primary care, leading to better health outcomes for patients and the communities in which they live.

To support this vision, we are proposing four recommendations that will be essential to delivering care to Ontarians:



RECOMMENDATION 1

Further invest in the expansion of interprofessional primary care teams in Ontario.

Recommendation provided in partnership with the Primary Care Collaborative



RECOMMENDATION 2

Address the health human resource (HHR) crisis in primary and community care through the investment of \$500M annually in the community sector over the next five years.

Recommendation provided in partnership with the Primary Care Collaborative



RECOMMENDATION 3

Support the implementation of primary care networks.



RECOMMENDATION 4

Invest in the digital health of primary care.



RECOMMENDATION 5

Embed and connect mental health and addictions services in primary care teams.

RECOMMENDATION 1

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Recommendation provided in partnership with the Primary Care Collaborative



Approximately 75% of Ontarians do not have access to comprehensive, team-based primary care.

Patients of team-based practices are more likely to receive comprehensive care and less likely to seek care at the emergency department. Sharing the care across a team can decrease burnout for clinicians and, when done right, can increase the number of patients a family physician can care for.

AFHTO recognizes the significant commitment this government has made to support interprofessional primary care, including the previously announced commitment of \$30 million per year for two years (\$60 million total) to expand and enhance interprofessional care teams and up to \$9.2 million to accelerate the impacts of OHTs including strengthening primary care system and accelerating Primary Care Networks (PCNs).

RECOMMENDATION 1



This investment in interprofessional primary care represents the first in 10 years and many teams applied to access the funding with strong and impactful plans. **We are calling on the government to triple this investment from \$30 million to \$90 million in the 2024 budget to enable more team-based care in Ontario.**

Over the long-term, we still believe substantial investments in team-based primary care is what is required to ensure every Ontarian has access to team-based primary care, prioritizing those who need it the most such as individuals with complex and chronic illnesses, mental health and addiction challenges, and regions that are underserved or with limited access to primary care teams.

We look forward to working with the Ministry of Health and government of Ontario over the next year to identify the investments required to reach this goal of team-based primary care for everyone in Ontario.

Every Ontarian deserves access to comprehensive and equitable care where and when they need it.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Address the health human resource (HHR) crisis in primary and community care through the investment of \$500M annually in the community sector over the next five years.

Recommendation provided in partnership with the Primary Care Collaborative



It takes a team to provide comprehensive primary care. The community health workforce encompasses a range of specialized health care roles, many of which are essential to team-based primary care models, including nurses in primary care, addiction and social workers in mental health organizations, and personal support workers in home and community care and long-term care.

This multifaceted workforce supports the network of team-based models to provide comprehensive care for patients with highly complex needs that often have multiple chronic conditions.

RECOMMENDATION 2



Ontario's community health care sector – including FHTs, NPLCs and CHCs – are facing an HHR crisis. AFHTO has been working alongside community health care associations to commission a comprehensive Ontario Community Health Compensation Market Salary Review. This review demonstrates the growing wage gap between primary and community care and the rest of the health care sector. For example, most health care workers in the community have received a 0 to 1.53% increase in wages in 2023 compared to an 11% increase for hospital nurses. Please refer to the [Ontario's Community Health Sector Pre-Budget Submission 2024-25](#) for further information.

Professionals working in our teams will continue to leave primary and community care resulting in increased use of expensive emergency departments and hospital services as access to primary care continues to diminish.

We are calling on the government to work with community health care partners to develop a comprehensive HHR strategy now. As part of this, we are asking that the government work towards reducing the wage gap between primary and community care and the rest of the health care system.

With our community partners we would like to work with the government to invest over \$500 million annually in the community health sector over the next five years to support wage equity. This should be supplemented with an annual increment of 2.9% per year to account for inflation.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Support the implementation of primary care networks.



Primary care networks (PCNs) play a critical role in the ongoing development of OHTs, making primary care more accessible and better connecting care for an improved patient experience and patient outcomes.

PCNs can reduce duplication through shared resources and learnings, support physician involvement in OHT leadership and engagement, promote best practices for primary care, and provide a pathway to reach primary care physicians, teams and their patients.

RECOMMENDATION 3



We are appreciative of the government's recent investment of \$9.2 million to implement improvements to patient care in OHTs, including supporting the establishment of PCNs. **We ask that the Ontario government prioritize funding from this investment to support the expansion and sustainability of PCNs so this additional responsibility does not fall on our members without support.**

AFHTO and its members have expertise in developing coordinated and effective primary care networks that deliver connected and convenient care to patients. **We ask that the Ministry of Health engage with AFHTO in the development of guidelines and future policies related to PCNs.**

RECOMMENDATION 4

Invest in the digital health of primary care.



Integrating digital health tools into primary care can make things easier for patients and help health teams work better together. As OHTs are maturing, to support communities and more patient information is being shared between providers, it's important to make sure that primary care teams have the right resources to protect patient information from cyber threats. This is particularly important given a recent increase in ransomware attacks targeted at health care organizations.

To do this, we must invest resources and funding to support cybersecurity for primary care teams. This will ensure that patient information is secure and can be shared between providers safely.

RECOMMENDATION 4



Investing in digital health for primary care is crucial, not only for smoother transitions between health providers but also for easy access to patients' medical records. Allocating resources to train and equip primary care teams will help them safeguard patient information, creating a secure environment for sharing essential medical details among the care team.

As healthcare becomes more digital, it's essential to support primary care teams in two key areas: **investing in digital tools for better patient care and providing resources for cybersecurity to keep patient information safe.** This dual investment will not only improve healthcare but also protect the privacy and security of patients' sensitive medical data.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Embed and connect mental health and addictions services in primary care team.



Primary care is often the first stop for individuals facing mental health challenges, with approximately three-quarters of Canadians relying on their primary care providers for mental health support. However, primary care teams are struggling due to insufficient resources and lengthy waits for community mental health and addictions services. Permanently embedding some mental health and addiction services directly in team-based primary care is crucial to addressing this challenge.

RECOMMENDATION 5



Team-based primary care plays a vital role in offering comprehensive care for individuals dealing with mental health and addiction issues. It ensures compassionate and thorough support for patients, helping them navigate the health system and facilitating smooth transitions in care. We cannot currently provide the same level of mental health and addictions care and services as our colleagues in this space and we do not intend to. But purposeful investments in primary care teams for mental health and addictions services would reduce the burden of demand on our partners, reduce “hand overs” for patients and provide needed support in the patients' medical home. As primary care is often the first point of contact in the health care system, sustainable and ongoing funding would help to improve access and reduce wait times for mental health and addictions services in communities across the province.

Urgent action is needed to enhance the integration of mental health and addiction services within primary care, as lives depend on it. Team-based primary care providers should have the resources to provide a first line of mental health and addictions services right there in their team without the patient going elsewhere for support.

To achieve a truly integrated health system, primary care must play a central role in coordinating care and navigating the system, aligning with the vision of OHTs. **Mental health and addictions services should be better connected to primary care for maximum effectiveness, offering patients a single point of contact throughout their healthcare journey and ensuring seamless transitions in care.**



Primary care providers across Ontario continue to deliver high-quality care to their patients, families, and their communities.

Primary care providers throughout Ontario are consistently delivering high-quality healthcare to their patients, families, and communities. To further enhance these efforts, further funding and investments to support primary care initiatives are essential. These investments will help to facilitate the expansion of team-based primary care services to all Ontarians. In support of these investments, AFHTO is committed to working with government to measure and evaluate outcomes associated with primary care teams.

This expansion is poised to enhance health outcomes, improve working conditions for healthcare providers, alleviate strain on hospitals, and play a crucial role in ensuring a resilient and cost-effective healthcare system capable of providing timely care to all residents.

To effectively support patients and ensure accessible care within local communities, it is imperative for the Ontario government to invest in interprofessional team-based primary care. The continued advancement and success of Ontario Health Teams (OHTs) is contingent on substantial investments and collaborations with primary care. On behalf of our interprofessional primary care teams, AFHTO urges the government of Ontario to champion team-based primary care and make strategic investments to fortify the primary point of access to care for countless Ontarians.

400 University Ave, Suite 2100
Toronto, ON | M5G 1S5

info@afhto.ca

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[/afhto](https://facebook.com/afhto)

afhto association of family
health teams of ontario