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Attn: Assignment Editor

Devastating Hospital Cuts & Flawed Process for Health Reform Consultation: Key Issues for this Session of the Ontario Legislature

Toronto – Ontario’s premier stated that jobs and the economy are her priorities for this session of Ontario’s Legislature, which opened today. Impacting both jobs and local economies but not part of the Premier’s media messages, two key health care issues impacting Ontario’s communities will also be on the front-burner, including:

- Devastating hospital cuts that are happening everywhere across the province.
- A sweeping plan for health reform that covers regional health governance (LHINs), home care, primary care and public health.

Ontario is heading into its ninth straight year of real-dollar cuts to public hospitals’ global budgets. This is the longest stretch of hospital cuts since the inception of public health care. As a result of the Wynne government’s funding cuts that have dropped Ontario’s hospital funding levels far below the rest of the country, local hospitals are announcing round after round of devastating cuts. In the southwest, all money for whole ranges of surgeries has run out since January or even earlier, leaving patients languishing on wait lists until after the next fiscal year starts (after April). Entire small and rural hospitals are again under threat in areas such as Minden. Hospitals like the one in Quinte West are under threat of losing virtually all surgeries. Massive job cuts that deprive our local hospitals of decades of experience and leave them with severe staffing shortages have been announced in communities such as Windsor where more than 160 RN positions are slated for the chopping block. Cuts -- including operating room closures, wholesale closure of local birthing units, devastating bed closures, eradication of hundreds of front-line and vital support staff positions and cuts to vital health professionals’ services and clinics -- are happening from Midland to Kitchener and Sarnia to Kawartha Lakes and beyond. Major cuts have already swept across Ottawa and Northeastern Ontario and more will be coming if they are not stopped. Ontario has already cut hospital services and patient staffing to lower levels than any other province.

In recent weeks, the Ministry of Health has delegated the Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) – Ontario’s cabinet-appointed regional health governance entities – to conduct public consultations on the Minister’s sweeping health reform plans. This means the LHINs are now conducting consultations on expanding their own powers, a clear conflict of interest. During the sessions, the LHINs give participants a presentation, ask a set of questions, and collate input. The Ontario Health Coalition has received numerous calls and emails complaining about the process. In one session, participants were not allowed to see the summary of their input. In another, after giving their presentation, the LHIN ran out of time to actually consult with participants. Everywhere, people are wondering how the LHINs can be trusted to accurately convey the feedback -- much of which is critical of the LHINs’ processes and activities -- to the Minister of Health. Public policy creation is not included in the LHINs’ legislative mandate; they were created under legislation and are responsible to the Legislature, not to a particular political party. Moreover, the legislated requirement for the government to review and evaluate the LHINs was never completed. The use of what are essentially crown corporations to engage in political work of this sort is not appropriate. Furthermore, there are widespread rumours that health reform legislation will be unveiled in March. If this is true, then the consultations are meaningless, as the health reform legislation is already written.

The Ontario Health Coalition is calling for a formal, on-the-record, proper consultation on the proposed health reform plans with adequate time for Ontarians to give meaningful input before legislation is introduced. The Coalition is also calling for Ontario’s government to restore hospital funding levels to at least the average of the rest of Canada to stop the cuts and privatization of our vital local hospital services.

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