



September 13, 2024

## Health care in crisis in northwestern Ontario: communities demand urgent solutions from Ford government

**Toronto/Rainy River/Thunder Bay/Emo, September 13, 2024:** An unprecedented crisis in hospital, EMS, and primary care services in northwestern Ontario is unfolding. Physicians are leaving Rainy River's hospital and clinic and the ambulance base in Emo is threatened with impending closure. The Mayor of Rainy River, the President of the District's paramedics' and hospital workers' union (CUPE 4807), and the Health Coalition held a press conference to bring attention to the crisis and demand urgent action from the Ford government. These health services are at risk amidst the worst staffing crisis the province has ever seen. They follow last year's unprecedented 1,200 vital hospital service closures. Rainy River emergency department has suffered temporary closures in the last year, with patients being told that they have to travel more than an hour to Fort Frances to the next nearest hospital emergency department.

In the Town of Rainy River all three permanent, full-time local physicians announced they are resigning due to a funding dispute with the Ford government. Two will leave at the end of September and the third will leave in November. This would leave no physician services in the hospital after September 30 or in the clinic after November 30. The hospital has secured temporary locum physicians from October 1 to November 22 (locum physicians are brought in by towns to provide coverage). If the Ford government continues to provide no long-term solutions, Rainy River's hospital and clinic is at risk of being left without physician services by the end of November. Residents would need to travel more than one hour – in good weather conditions – to access the nearest hospital physician services in Fort Frances and there is no solution for the loss of family medicine services.

In the meantime, the District of Rainy River Services Board has announced the impending closure of the ambulance station in Emo due to critical staffing shortages. EMS would be removed from Emo to Fort Frances and Rainy River to keep the stations on those two towns open. There is no hospital emergency department in Emo. Those in need of emergency care in Emo and surrounding towns would need to wait for paramedics dispatching from Rainy River and Fort Frances, and those paramedics would be stretched thinner over a larger region. The Community Paramedicine program that will be moved to Emo cannot replace paramedic services because it provides primary care, not EMS.

The Health Coalition is calling for:

- Long-term stable funding for hospitals that is enough to improve levels of service. This is currently not happening. Over the last budget year, the province ran hospital funding at less than the rate of inflation, meaning real dollar cuts, (0.5 – 0.9% -- less than 1% funding increase) while hospitals have been in the worst staffing crisis and services have been closing down across Ontario. They finally announced the hospital funding increase in the final weeks of the fiscal year, too late to hire staff and save services. The funding announced is insufficient to improve services and address the crisis.
- They are calling on the government to commit to long-term stable funding for the special needs of Northern Ontario.
- They are calling for the provincial government to resolve their conflict with the doctors and stabilize primary care. The Coalition is advocating for team-based approaches with critical care nurses, nurse

practitioners, health professionals working in teams with doctors in primary care, and enhanced supports for the entire team in hospitals. In other communities, these approaches have helped to stabilize coverage.

- They are calling for the province to finally take action to stop the for-profit staffing agencies that are cannibalizing the staff from the public hospitals and driving up costs.

Speaker quotes:

Deborah Ewald, Mayor of Rainy River: “We have a very senior population and people are scared and nervous. These people have lived in their area their whole lives and they’ve paid taxes their whole lives, and in their old age their health care is being pulled out from beneath them...It’s just a terrible, terrible thing that’s happened and there needs to be some significant changes otherwise people are going to die. It’s that dire.”

Malcolm Daley, President of CUPE Local 4807: “We are at the tail end of an ongoing struggle with staffing, and we’ve reached a crisis point. We are no longer treading water and we are starting to drown...Our access to health care has never been lower.”

Jules Tupker, co-chair of the Thunder Bay Health Coalition: “It is unbelievable that the government is allowing this to happen...All we get are empty promises, day in and day out. These empty promises have resulted in what is happening in Rainy River and Emo. It’s amazing that this continues to go on.”

Natalie Mehra, executive director of the Ontario Health Coalition: “This is a major problem. People choose where they live when they need to be close to hospital and emergency department services. And it isn’t only the emergency services, it is the entire community’s access to family medicine. Now people need to know what is happening to decide whether they need to move. Distances are too far to be able to travel in the summer in northern Ontario, let alone in the winter. We simply cannot continue to have last minute stop gap measures that aren’t enough to stabilize the services. We need a real answer from the Ford government on solutions that will stabilize the services because people’s lives are at risk.