

ONTARIO'S COMMUNITY HEALTH SECTOR

Pre-Budget Submission 2026-27

INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the ten provincial member associations that represent **over 1,300 community-based agencies** and their **over 200,000 workers**, Ontario's community health sector welcomes this opportunity to participate in the 2026 pre-budget consultation.

This year's budget arrives at a moment when the province is striving to reduce wait times, improve access to care, and alleviate pressure on hospitals, goals also shared by the community health sector. Community health workers play a critical role in achieving these goals: delivering primary care, mental health and addiction treatment, home and community care, long-term care, developmental services, and social supports that enable Ontarians to receive the right care in the right place at the right time.

Despite their essential role, Ontario's community health sector is facing a staffing crisis, driven in large part by a widening wage gap when compared to wages for the same positions in hospitals and the education system.

THE CHALLENGE: A GROWING WAGE GAP WE CAN NO LONGER AFFORD

Community health workers earn significantly less than their peers performing similar work in hospitals, schools, and other public-sector settings. As a result:

- In some cases, staff at the beginning of their career earn as much as **23%** less in the community. Five years into their career, that gap increases to **46%**.
- **94%** of community health organizations identify compensation as their top recruitment and retention challenge.
- Staff in community health saw an average **1.53%** wage increase in 2023, compared to 11% for hospital nurses and 8% for emergency medical workers, further exacerbating the already existing disparity.
- Community health agencies across the province report chronic front-line service vacancies, high turnover, and a shrinking pipeline of skilled workers.

This is a system-wide risk. When workers leave community health for higher wages elsewhere, Ontarians face longer wait times and reduced access to care, in both the community and hospital sectors, all of which result in costly increases in hospital overcrowding.



Nurse Practitioner-led Clinic
ASSOCIATION



FOR US.
FOR YOU.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO ONTARIO'S HEALTH SYSTEM

Supporting community health is one of the strongest levers the province has to stabilize the healthcare system.

1 in 5 emergency room visits could be treated in the community

Supports vulnerable populations

Saves up to \$494 million annually by reducing avoidable emergency room visits

Improves access in rural and urban areas

Promotes prevention, early intervention, and continuity of care

Provides care closer to home

When the community health workforce is stable, patients receive timely care and hospitals experience less pressure. When it is unstable, the entire system bears the burden of the cost, and patients suffer.

OUR ASK

Closing the wage gap is a multiyear effort that requires thoughtful, phased implementation. Objective analysis shows that if Ontario invested **\$500 million annually over five years**, including a future indexing to inflation, this would eliminate the wage gap between the community and other sectors, and play a stabilizing role in the sustainability of the healthcare system.

CONCLUSION

Ontario relies on community health workers every day to treat illness, support mental health, provide care at home, help people live independently, and keep families well, and in many cases, they provide this care 24/7. They care for people of all ages and backgrounds, often with highly complex needs, and they are essential to achieving a sustainable and high-performing healthcare system.

Closing the wage gap is not simply about fairness; it is about protecting access to care, reducing system pressure, and ensuring Ontario's healthcare investments deliver maximum impact.

The ten provincial community health associations are committed to working collaboratively with the government to build a stable, sustainable community health workforce, which supports a stable and sustainable healthcare system, a goal we all share.

