

THE ADVOCATE



Government Affairs Advisory

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The Hon. Dwight Duncan, Ontario Minister of Finance.

Ontario Budget 2009 Significant Steps at a Time of Crisis

A Tax Reform Budget

The 2009 provincial budget, released on March 26th at Queen's Park, contains a number of commitments that will please dozens of advocacy groups in Ontario. This is one of the first times in a long time that social/affordable housing, for example, is given actual dollar commitments – a welcome move indeed! Yet many in our sector had hoped to see an accompanying commitment to attendant care dollars that would help provide more affordable, supportive housing for Ontarians with disabilities.

A recession budget that relies heavily on federally matched dollars and produces the largest deficit in Ontario's history immediately raises eyebrows. Moreover, the move towards



a single tax (harmonization of the GST and the PST) that will mean higher costs for many consumers in Ontario is a risky proposition for any government in an economic downturn. While such increases are ostensibly offset by an immediate reduction in personal income tax and next year's tax refunds/rebates accompanying the harmonization measure, one could ask if this is the most appropriate time for tax reform?

The Social Services Sector

Among the largest increases in Ministry expenditures are those affecting Community and Social Services and Children and Youth Service.

For the social and non-profit sector, Budget 2009 breathes life and financial commitment into the Poverty Reduction Strategy (this Bill still requires Royal Assent, but essentially coordinates many of the expenditures for our sector, combined with some of the housing dollars). As with many items in this budget, the housing dollars for low-income seniors and people with disabilities still needs more detail and clarification.

The March 26th budget outlines the broad-brush strokes for spending and revenue projects, with more specific announcements on individual programs (such as those in Community and Social Services) forthcoming.

Overview

The most controversial section in the budget is the announced intention to harmonize the provincial sales tax with the federal GST. Minister Duncan acknowledges that a single tax will mean cost increases for some Ontarians (eg. cable and phone bills, vitamins), and the government will offer tax refund cheques to help address some of this increase.

Finance officials also explained and emphasized in detail that public sector and non-profit organizations will experience a net neutral effect of the single tax. Organizations like March of Dimes Canada "would be able to claim rebates for the provincial portion of the single sales tax, so that the net effect of the tax on each sector would be fiscally neutral relative to the amount of Retail Sales Tax currently paid by the sectors. As with the GST, the rebates would be a percentage of tax paid," said Minister Duncan during the budget lockup.

Interestingly, the budget includes \$80 million dollars to social agencies for infrastructure repairs, improvements to security measures, and measures that will increase physical accessibility. This money will flow to approximately 4,000 existing projects.

Another \$3 million is committed to something called "community hubs", which will be created in low-income neighbourhoods throughout Ontario, and serve as resource centres that pool the programs and services of education, social and community organizations.

On the Aging at Home front, \$223 million will be spent in 2009-2010. While the money will be administered through the LHINs, it remains unclear how and where the \$223 million will flow.

The budget also sees a net increase of \$26 million to homecare. Any spending commitment is good, and represents movement in the right direction, but such an amount does not represent a fundamental recognition of the value of caregivers and aging at home. Clearly, more systemic policy work is required in this area.



Notable Items at a Glance

Finance officials indicate that further Ministerial program expenditures will be announced. Below is a list of what we do know:

- Ontario Child Benefit increases to \$1,000 per child in July 2009, rather than in 2011 as previously announced.
- The Ontario Disability Support Program increases by an incremental 2%.
- A 2% increase to Ontario Works and ODSP and comfort allowances for residents of long-term care homes.
- Non-profits should feel a revenue-neutral impact of the move to a single tax. Administration will be central and phased in to ease filing complexity.
- \$360 million in new affordable housing for low-income seniors and people with disabilities.
- \$175 million over 2 years to extend the Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program.
- Municipal rent-banks to receive \$5 million annually starting in 2009-2010.
- \$80 million for 4,000 projects for social agencies for repairs, improve security and accessibility. It needs to be determined how this will flow, and to what degree our consumers will benefit.
- With the move to a single tax, exemptions will include groceries and medical devices.
- New \$260 refundable sales tax credit for low-income seniors.
- \$3 million to establish "community hubs" in selected low-income neighbourhoods, bringing together community partners to provide social, community and educational services.
- Approximately \$700 million will be spent over the next 2 years in skills training and literacy initiatives. As well, an additional \$32 million will be spent in 2009 to assist roughly 100,000 youth to obtain summer employment.
- \$90 million to expand literacy skills, basic skills training, community projects, distance learning and workplace literacy.
- A temporary 100% accelerated CCA (Capital Cost Allowance) rate for eligible computers and software acquired after January 27, 2009.
- In 2010, the maximum for the Ontario Seniors Homeowners Property Tax Grant doubles to \$500.
- Making more money available from RRSPs to apply to home modifications to create greater accessibility at home. Details to be forthcoming.
- Individuals with income less than \$80,000 will receive 3 payments totaling \$300 as a result of the new single tax, with the first payment in June 2010, second in December 2010, and third in June 2011.
- Permitting pension plans to offer phased retirement, which means seniors will be able to continue working and receiving their pension, while also continuing to accrue a pension.
- Aims to establish an independent and sustainable pension plan, with further reforms in 2009.
- An immediate reduction in the first bracket of personal income tax, going down from 6.05% to 5.05%.
- The Ontario Property Tax Credit starting in 2010 will include an occupancy cost credit of 20% of rent paid up to \$625 for seniors, plus 10% of occupancy cost.
- Seniors will have increased access to locked-in bank accounts.
- Intention to strengthen home care services by providing referrals and authorizing admission to long-term care homes.
- The increase in funding to long-term care homes is \$3.1 billion, with a front-line staff increase identified as a priority.



Budget 2009 also proposes the introduction of a new Deprivation Index. This would be an indicator to determine the number of households in Ontario that are lacking necessities.

The introduction of the Budget is the first step of a spending and revenue plan over the next fiscal year.

Please direct any questions to:
schristianson@marchofdimes.ca or
jmacmaster@marchofdimes.ca

Future Directions at March of Dimes Canada

Government Relations and Advocacy will be working on achieving legislative landmarks that benefit March of Dimes' constituency and caregivers/families while simultaneously building brand awareness, resources support and program growth. One goal this year is to press for a national announcement on disability legislation and to participate as a key stakeholder in the consultations that would evolve from such an announcement.

Our specific focus over the next year will be threefold: 1. ensuring regulatory compliance; 2. reinforcing and expanding our leadership in issues advocacy; and 3. implementing a growth-oriented national campaign.

March of Dimes has a proud history of influencing public policy, advancing disability issues and creating partnerships through government programs and services. Today, governments approach March of Dimes for input, expertise, feedback and partnership initiatives.

We are directly involved in every facet of the Accessibility for Ontarians with a Disability Act (AODA). As the individual Standards are passed by Cabinet, our work will focus on regulatory compliance with the legislation, as well as the identification and development of related business and revenue-generating initiatives. Elections Ontario and the Ministry of the Attorney General recently called upon March of Dimes for input into partnership possibilities on compliance with the AODA. Customer Service is now law. The Transportation Standard is at its final stage. We have recently submitted our formal response to the proposed Information and Communication Standard, and we continue to participate in developing the first proposals for the Employment and Built Environment Standards. We will continue working with the evolving Local Health Integration Networks (LHIN) and Community Care Access Centres (CCAC, which help to access government-funded home and community services and long-term care homes) structure to ensure the best possible outcomes for our programs and services. Finally, our Submission to the Minister of Finance on Home and Vehicle Modification Program (HVMP) and Aging at Home funding, delivered by Vice President of Programs, Jerry Lucas, has been well-received thus far, and our efforts continue to advance the dialogue in this area.

We are currently identifying government funding opportunities for our newly established Emergency Preparedness project. We have also begun dialogue with newly appointed federal officials for the 2011 Festival of International Conferences on Caregiving, Disability, Aging and Technology (FICCDAT). To learn more visit www.ficcdat.ca.

We will continue working collaboratively with our inter-agency partners on the Canada Revenue



Agency guidelines for charitable fundraising and the unfolding of the Registered Disability Savings Program (RDSP). As well, the Office of Disability Issues recently invited March of Dimes to participate in a federal initiative to provide feedback to the Minister on existing federal disability programs.

A growth-oriented national campaign will begin unfolding in the coming weeks. Working with our existing Chapter networks in Peer Supports, and creating alliances and partnerships across Canada, this campaign will build upon our election advocacy over the past few years, by utilizing web-based vehicles and information advocacy. The emphasis will be on the need for a national legislative framework that includes a strategy for home modifications, caregiving, supportive and affordable housing and defined targets for national accessibility legislation.

Internally, we will be launching new communication vehicles, such as an e-brief and an integrated multimedia network builder. We aim to figure prominently in media panel discussions. We also hope to pursue a "learning" series that brings experts from various areas into March of Dimes for staff, consumers and external partners – be they tax clinics, workshops, seminars or webcasts.



"I encourage you to show your support for a national framework on caregiving, home modification and supportive housing. Follow this link:

<http://proc.warrensworld.ca/vote.php> and vote YES for national disability legislation today."

Andria Spindel

President & CEO, March of Dimes Canada

The National Perspective Federal Budget 2009

The federal budget was delivered by the Honourable Jim Flaherty, Minister of Finance, on January 27th.

More than any spending item in this year's budget, we see timing and the actual flow of dollars as critical to this year's budget succeeding in the way the federal government hopes it will.

Neither the budget itself, nor the press conferences and briefing, elucidate two critical details: 1. when will the spending and other budgetary measures commence; and 2. how and through what means will those newly-announced dollars flow? Such information is critical for a budget plan during recessionary times.

The Minister of Finance was quick to point out during post-Budget briefings that the Ministers of the Crown will be accountable for addressing Canadians' concerns in this regard. The Official Opposition gave its conditional stamp of approval to the budget – provided that a full accounting of the newly-announced program dollars and results is communicated regularly to Parliament. One would expect that the reporting to Parliament will comprise an addendum to the delivery and accountability mechanisms of the budget, but more on this to come as details unfold.

Three expenditure items stand out in this year's federal budget: 1. significant monies are committed to Employment Insurance and related programs; 2. long advocated by many national organizations, existing social housing will receive investments for upgrades and renovations; and 3. modest relief will see a few more dollars in the pockets of Canadians.



Most relevant to March of Dimes, EI-training programs will be longer, with more funding targeted to those programs and sectors hit hardest by the recession. Extensions to training programs, new contracts and increased eligibility all translate into an opportunity for March of Dimes to consider where we can most effectively deliver employment services training.

On the housing front, the budget commits the national government to its single biggest investment in social housing in more than 20 years. Some of this budget is actually “re-announcements” from last fall. In other words, the government re-announced funding extensions, which are limited for the most part to existing units and existing social housing agreements, and rolled the homelessness program dollars into the same pot as the extension of the federal housing rehabilitation program and the relatively tiny federal affordable housing initiative, thus arriving at an overall amount of \$1.9 billion over five years.

New monies for new units fall into the \$75 million dollars for the new construction of housing units for people with disabilities, flowing through the Affordable Housing Initiative. This, together with extensions to the Homelessness Partnering Initiative and the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program mentioned above, were announced during the last federal election.

On the tax relief front, the biggest income tax benefit in this budget is the basic exemption (ie. that amount of income that goes untaxed), which increases to \$10,320. Adjustments were also made to the tax brackets and the levels at which specific taxation rates apply to ones' income. This latter measure represents a good move, albeit one that is quite modest.

The Age Credit will be raised to \$6408 (an increase of \$1,000), a welcome move for seniors.

Seniors see additional assistance in this budget. The Affordable Housing Initiative officially commits \$400 million over two years to build housing for low income seniors. Supportive service dollars will have to be met through provincial funding.

The Targeted Initiative for Older Workers receives an additional \$60 million over three years. The other change to this initiative is that it will now be available in “vulnerable” cities and / or populations (and not just rural areas, as was previously the case).

For approximately one year, Canadian families may avail themselves of the home renovation tax credit, worth up to \$1350 per family, until February 2010. The Home Renovation Tax Credit should be useful for those wishing to retrofit their homes to make them more accessible, such as seniors and Canadians with disabilities. Federal finance officials indicate that eligible expenses should include retrofits such as wheelchair ramps. Here we see a heightened possibility of the nucleus for a national modification strategy that keeps people in their homes and communities, and saves the health/care system money, while providing an economic stimulus.

On the operational front, organizations can enjoy a newly-announced, temporary 100% capital cost allowance depreciation rate for computers purchased between January 29, 2009 and February 1, 2011.

And of particular interest, through the Federal Infrastructure funding, Budget 2009 provides \$20 million per year over two years to improve the



accessibility of federally owned buildings for people with disabilities. This opens an opportunity for consulting and service delivery to the Government of Canada, as well as moving further on the reality that demands national legislation to establish nation-wide accessibility standards.

Visit us online at www.marchofdimes.ca for additional information about the 2009 federal budget.

Update on the AODA Two New Standards for Public Review

The public review period for the Accessible Information and Communication Standard is closed. The official response of March of Dimes supports the direction and intent of the Standard, and makes several recommendations on the specific content of the proposed regulation.

There are significant information and communication barriers for people with disabilities, and Ontario needs firm and enforceable guidelines to ensure that everything from street signs and websites to government forms and IT systems include all people with disabilities. The Committee responsible for drafting the Standard is now reviewing the feedback from the public and affected stakeholder groups.

The Committee will submit a final proposed standard to the Minister of Community and Social Services for consideration as law.

Did You Know?

Ontario is the first jurisdiction in Canada to develop province-wide, enforceable accessibility standards. The Information and Communications standard and the Employment Standard represent the third and fourth standards to be released for public review. The Accessibility Standards for Customer Service, Ontario Regulation 429/07 is the first standard to become law. It came into force on January 1, 2008. In the fall of 2008, March of Dimes established an internal committee, the Customer Service Compliance Committee, to create our official policies, practices and procedures that will enhance customer service to Ontarians with disabilities and ensure that March of Dimes is fully compliant with the AODA.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

A big step toward more accessible voting for people with disabilities is being made by Elections Ontario. In late January, several disability agencies and individuals with disabilities met at the headquarters of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) with staff from Elections Ontario and from Dominion/Voting, the manufacturers of the new voting equipment.

A demonstration of Dominion/Voting's "ImageCast Ballot Marker Device" machine was given, followed by feedback on the device, and on electronic voting in general by participants. If this equipment were approved for use, it would mean that many more people with disabilities could vote independently, privately and with dignity, for the candidate of his or her choice. One of the real hopes is to attract more people with disabilities to exercise their franchise.



In the 2007 provincial election, Elections Ontario, Ontario March of Dimes, CNIB, Cerebral Palsy Association and the Canadian Hearing Society collaborated to host three all accessible, all candidates debates in three Ontario ridings. These were first-ever events and another significant move forward: people with disabilities now have the opportunity to get involved in the entire election process. One of the results of the collaboration was the production of "Count Us In," a ground-breaking booklet on how to remove barriers to political participation in Accessible All Candidates Meetings.



ImageCast Ballot Marker Device, or more simply, the vote tabulator used at the March 5th by-election in the Ontario riding of Haliburton-Kawartha Lakes-Brock.

Elections Ontario communications officer, Susan Logan, said the new electronic voting device would be tested in an election in the riding of Haliburton – Kawartha Lakes – Brock. New legislation would have to be passed for the

device to be used in either a regular provincial, or federal election – after a request for proposal had been submitted and approved.

Therefore, after this testing is complete, and the benefit and efficiency of the equipment is proven, a recommendation will be sent to the provincial government for further legislation. The machines cost between \$10,000 to \$15,000 each, if purchased outright. They can also be rented. In the recent U.S. presidential election 4,500 Dominion/Voting units were used in New York State alone. The device has gained an international reputation.

Elections Ontario had the electronic voting device set up at advance polls exclusively. That gave electors with disabilities the advantage of more and longer windows of opportunity to vote before election day. There were seven days for advance poll voting. At these designated advance polls, all voters, disabled or not, used the device and all votes were then counted electronically. This may or may not be seen as an overall technological advance for Canada. Electronic voting has been widely used in the U.S. with varying results.

The ImageCast/Ballot Marker Device is a described by its creators as a "cutting-edge accessible voting station... which allows voters of differing abilities to generate a marked paper ballot via an audio and/or visual presentation, using a hand-held voting device. Other assistive devices such as sip-and-puff, and paddles, can also be used to select candidates." As well, any voter can request a review of their choice to confirm the correct candidate was properly selected. Attendants are allowed to assist. Various languages can be accessed. There is a large monitor with a cover screen for privacy.



ImageCast Audio Tactile Interface, also known as the ballot marking device, allows electors with visual impairment, low vision and those who don't have use of hands or arms to manipulate this tool to cast their vote independently. (Help can also be requested.)

After participants had an opportunity to use the device, a number of recommendations were made:

- An amendment should be considered so that the machine could be used both provincially and municipally. An Omnibus bill could be introduced to recommend cost sharing.
- Use huge signs and offer demonstrations for voters.
- In order to promote the voting device, have a camcorder available to get positive feedback from voters immediately after voting. Alert media, such as CBC, to also be on site to interview voters on the first day of advance polling. Use sites such as Bloorview Children's Rehab or Independent Living as an electronic voting advance poll.
- Use plainer language and avoid technical terms as much as possible. Make instructions shorter.
- Coordinate audio instructions with the pressing of keys on the hand-held device.
- Use a real, not synthesized, voice for instructions.

Elections Ontario and Dominion/Voting were appreciative of all feedback. Many adjustments will be made based on what people observed.

Now that Elections Ontario has tested the equipment in the March 5th by-election in Haliburton – Kawartha Lakes – Brock, there could be growing interest within the disabled and seniors communities about the significance of this important advance. We want to hear from you, especially if you had the opportunity to actually try out electronic voting. If you did, you were a pioneer!

Ontario Courts Consult with Disability Community

Courthouse and courtroom accessibility that meets the diverse needs of people with disabilities is currently in the sights of the Facilities Management Branch of the Ministry of the Attorney General, the arm of the Ministry responsible for the physical elements of courthouses.

In late January 2009, disability representatives met at the Attorney General's office in Toronto to hear from Ministry staff and from the consulting team of NORR Architects and SPH Planning and Consulting who are working together to develop Accessibility Design Guidelines. March of Dimes was represented, as was the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, ARCH Disability Law Centre, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, Women with Disabilities and several others, along with individuals with disabilities, who were asked to provide input and perspective on accessible design for people with disabilities.

Ministry Official Melissa Gordon spoke of the unusual challenges that courthouses present. They are "unique spaces" that have a life of their own. Security measures for everyone entering the building, movement of criminals



within designated spaces in criminal courts, protection of victims, witnesses, jurors, children and any people with special needs, the presence of police in various roles – all these vital services and more make for a complex set of characteristics that need to also meld with the needs of people with disabilities.

The new Accessibility Guidelines for Courthouses will apply to new buildings exclusively, not for retrofits at this time. At the same time the Ministry is committed to its stakeholders, people with disabilities, in working together to produce guidelines that will provide the best possible environment and services to improve the way things are.

To orient attendees to a typical day in the life of a courthouse, in this case a criminal court, a video was shown in which a Crown Attorney described events, both normal and unanticipated, that could take place in a 24-hour period. Normally police arrive early (8 a.m.) to screen witnesses and jurors. As well, police provide security checks at the entrance of the court for all who enter. In some jurisdictions between 75 to 80 criminals could be processed by special constables in a day. "Secure wait spaces" for victims of domestic violence, homicides or hate crimes need to be available and monitored. All these aspects of Court life also have to be negotiated by people with disabilities.

The consultants who are developing the new Accessibility Design Guidelines, NORR Architects and SPH Planning and Consulting, gave an overview of their document produced for the Ministry on Best Practices, an Accessibility Study. Prior to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) becoming law in 2005, the Ontario Building Code and the

Ontario Realty Standard had provided the guidelines for accessibility in public buildings. These are now outdated. And new guidelines need to be researched toward achieving a "universal design" that will set the standard for accessibility in all new buildings, including courthouses. During the overview, those people with disabilities, and those representing people with disabilities, had questions and suggestions. Among the comments made:

- In planning court room design make sure the maximum turning space for larger wheelchairs and scooters is taken into consideration (increase from a 5 to 8 feet turning circle);
- People with disabilities ought to have "access to the law," as well as to courthouses;
- While physical requirements receive the most attention based on spatial and cost implications, accessibility guidelines must also address the use of colour, patterns, tactile surfaces, auditory devices and acoustical cues;
- The first stages of entering a courthouse involve a long wait in a long lineup of people, all of whom must pass through a security check. This is an intense experience and particularly difficult for some seniors and others with disabilities. Information on courthouse procedures, facilities for disabled people and circulation paths should be readily available at the entrance through information booths, panels and/or personnel.
- Is there easy access to washroom facilities? Can a person sit down and not lose their place in line? Is there sufficient, easy-to-read signage to direct the public with all necessary information?

Attorney General staff responded. It was suggested that there be some advance



information available, especially for people with disabilities, of what to expect in the pre-court stage of any visit.

Perhaps court authorities need to rethink the procedure of everyone arriving at the building at the same time in the morning. Potentially, there could be 200 to 300 people coming in. In some cases, there could be up to 1,200 potential jurors also arriving at the same time. One of the most difficult dilemmas facing court officials is the pressing need for police security versus the physical and emotional needs of the public. A study is underway to assess courthouse signage needs.

These and other issues were debated. It is hoped as the new Accessibility Design Guidelines are developed, that ongoing consultation with the disability stakeholder community will be sought. Courthouses are an important aspect of community life for everyone.

February 20th, 2009 marked the United Nations first-ever World Day of Social Justice

The General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed February 20th, 2009 as the World Day of Social Justice back in November of 2007. This year marks the first year it has been observed.

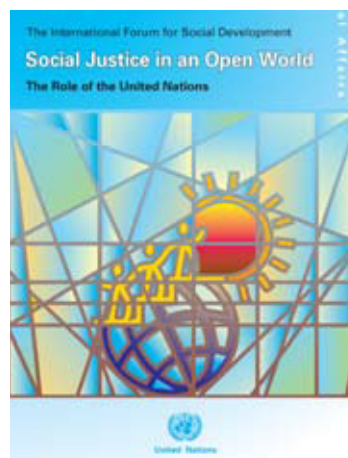
Just prior to the day, General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann "stressed the need to recognize the rights of the marginalized and boost their inclusion in local and global financial structures." He also said in order to bring the poor, people with disabilities, older people, disaffected youth and other minorities into the mainstream, "policymaking must recognize their human rights as full members of society." As well,

"Poor, developing countries have been ordered ... to cut back on the social and economic programs that ensure a decent standard of living for their citizens, perpetuating the murderous deprivation of their poorest people," the President said.



General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann

In designating the World Day, the 192-member United Nations body put forward "the need to consolidate further the efforts of the international community in poverty eradication and in promoting full employment and decent work, gender equality and access to social well-being and justice for all."



This 2006 book, Social Justice in an Open World, The Role of the United Nations, states in its introduction "... the idea that all individuals share a common humanity, and that oppression and misery are not necessarily part of the human condition, has started to permeate the collective consciousness."

Many of the issues people with disabilities face are social justice issues. We need more than a World Day of Social Justice, although it is an important starting point, especially when all the member countries of the UN support the principals outlined above. We need the political will that recognizes and acts on these social justice issues – issues at our own doorstep.

New website helps Ontarians find local health care services faster: ER wait times targeted

On February 12th the Premier's office announced a more coordinated way for all Ontarians to find the health care services they need online. "For the first time, with the click of a mouse, information about local health services is available in a single place: www.ontario.ca/healthcareoptions."



Falling under the banner of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the site is entitled, Your Health Care Options. The idea behind this new service is to increase choices and access

to family care and to reduce emergency room wait times by channeling people to the most appropriate care giver suited to immediate needs. There are four main areas of health care services for the user to access: Medical Services Directory (a database, listing walk-in and after-hours clinics, urgent care centres and family health care providers), Telehealth Ontario (a confidential telephone service to get advice from a Registered Nurse, a service that has been operating for a while), Health Care Connect (helps you find a family doctor in your community), Community Care Access Centres. So the individual health care information sites have been amalgamated into one.

Another important feature of the CCACs is that they help people navigate the array of community support and health agencies in given communities. For those in the disability community who are not aware of this service, it could be a welcome resource for useful community support.

Subsequent to the Health Care Options site, the Premier also announced the launching of "Public Reporting of Time Spent in the ER." In a press release dated February 19th it was stated, "In a one-of-a-kind North American initiative, Ontario is setting clear targets for reducing the total amount of time patients spend in emergency rooms – and is publicly posting data about local ERs online." Generally speaking, the latest data shows that 90% of patients with minor conditions spend a maximum of 4.6 hours in the ER, while the target is 4 hours. For patients with complex conditions, 90% spend a maximum of 13.5 hours in the ER, while the target is 8 hours. To more closely align with these targets, the provincial government has a 3-point strategy. First is to provide patients with appropriate alternatives, such as those available on the



new Health Care Options web site. Second is to increase the capacity and improve processes within ERs, by providing financial incentives, such as the Hospital Performance Fund program. Third is to speed the flow of patients from the ER by identifying those patients occupying beds who are better suited to alternative levels of care.

Statistics show that hospital emergency rooms in Ontario see more than 5 million patients every year. And about half of emergency room visits are for less urgent conditions or non-urgent conditions such as chronic back pain or a sore throat. Perhaps everyone would be better served by going online, if possible, and checking out the best health care option that suits your needs at the time. It could save hours of waiting in the ER.

Commenting on the new Health Care Options alternative, Hon. David Caplan, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care said, "When Ontarians are sick or hurt, their first instinct might be to go to an emergency room. This service will help them get the care they need, faster and closer to home."



Produced by:

Steven Christianson, Manager,
Government Relations & Advocacy

Janet Macmaster, Assistant
Government Relations & Advocacy

Andria Spindel, President & CEO
Executive Lead

Contact:

jmacmaster@marchofdimes.ca
March of Dimes Canada
Government Relations & Advocacy
10 Overlea Boulevard
Toronto ON M4H 1A4
Tel: 416-425-3463, ext. 7388

www.marchofdimes.ca

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