

Ontario Introduces Second Phase of Its Plan to Stay Open

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This article is paraphrased from a Government of Ontario press release (click [here](#) to read) and the Plan to Stay Open: Health System Stability and Recovery (click [here](#) to read).

Throughout the seventh wave, Ontario's healthcare system has been struggling with not enough staff to care for the high volume of patients, resulting in longer wait times to receive care and temporary closures of emergency rooms around the province.*.*.*.*

Many are calling it a crisis, including frontline workers, healthcare unions, and organizations such as [Ontario Health](#), [the Ontario Hospital Association](#), [the Registered Nurse Association of Ontario](#), and [the Ontario Nurses' Association](#). Over the long weekend at the beginning of the month, 14 hospitals in Ontario closed their emergency rooms, beds, or Intensive Care Units because of a lack of staff, especially nurses.*

Since the state of the hospitals is considered a key indicator of whether the province will go back to reinstating public health measures, the provincial government released its *Plan to Stay Open: Health System Stability and Recovery* in March 2022. Yesterday, the provincial government released the second phase of the *Plan to Stay Open*. It explained that "this is a five-point plan to provide the best care possible to patients and residents while ensuring the resources and supports are in place to keep the province and economy open."

Here are some key highlights for each of these five points.

Preserving our Hospital Capacity

- Continued access to testing for COVID-19 as well as Paxlovid and Evusheld therapies for treatment for those who are eligible.
- There are plans to expand eligibility for Evusheld for high-risk populations in the coming weeks.
- COVID-19 and flu shots will continue to be provided to reduce the number of people in hospital due to respiratory illnesses.
- Free rapid antigen tests will continue to be available to the general public at participating grocery and pharmacy retailers throughout the province as well as for workplaces, schools, and congregate settings.

Providing the Right Care in the Right Place

- The provincial government is introducing legislation that, if passed, will let doctors place patients who no longer need hospital treatment in alternative care settings in the

community while they wait for their preferred Long-Term Care home. The government says that there will be mandatory guidelines to ensure patients continue to stay close to a partner, spouse, loved ones or friends, and ensure these patients won't pay out of pocket for any cost difference between their temporary home and their preferred home. These guidelines are still being developed as the provincial government consults agencies and frontline partners. They predict that this will free up over 250 hospital beds within the first six months and reduce the flow of patients to the hospital going forward.

- The provincial government is also giving paramedics the ability to divert patients from emergency departments to other settings that can also meet their needs.
- Ontario is increasing bed capacity in Long-Term Care homes by adding more COVID-19 isolation beds based on community demand and COVID-19 risk levels. By the end of this summer, approximately 300 Long-Term Care beds that were set aside for COVID-19 isolation will be safely available for people on wait lists for Long-Term Care homes. 1,000 more beds may be available within six months.
- The government is also expanding access to specialized supports that help people living in Long-Term Care or while in their own home before their admission to Long-Term Care. These supports include behavioural supports for patients with dementia, specialized staff resources, on-site treatment, and upgrading equipment to match patient needs in the home. These initiatives are expected to free up to 400 hospital beds.
- Ontario is also increasing funding for 20 additional hospice beds in residential hospice or a home setting to support people in a more compassionate end-of-life-care setting.

Further Reducing Surgical Waitlists

- To reduce wait times for surgeries, Ontario is investing more into paediatric hospitals and existing private clinics. These services will continue to be covered by OHIP.
- The provincial government is investing over \$300 million in 2022–23 as part of the province's surgical recovery strategy, bringing the total investment to \$880 million over the last three fiscal years.
- The government is also funding more than 150,000 additional operating hours for hospital-based MRI and CT machines.

Easing Pressure on our Emergency Departments

- Ontario is adding 400 physician residents to support the workforce in northern and rural Ontario.
- Ontario is working with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario to speed up the registration process for doctors, including those from out-of-province and who may want to work in rural and northern emergency departments.

Further Expanding Ontario's Health Workforce

- The next phase of Ontario’s Plan to Stay Open temporarily covers the costs of paperwork that might be holding back internationally trained nurses and retired nurses from returning to work. This can help individual nurses save up to \$1,500.
- Ontario seeks to add up to 6,000 more healthcare workers. Combined with the 13,000 workers added during the first phase of the *Plan to Stay Open*, the two plans together can add 19,000 more health care workers to Ontario’s health workforce.
- A new program for internationally educated personal support workers will bring 500 new home and community care and Long-Term Care workers into the system.
- The provincial government is also working with the College of Nurses of Ontario and Ontario Health to expand funding for a partnership that has supported over 600 international nurses in getting licensed since January. The government anticipates that another 400 international nurses will gain the practice and language requirements necessary to work in Ontario by the end of the fiscal year.
- Beginning this fiscal year, the provincial government will be investing up to \$57.6 million over 3 years to further increase the number of nurse practitioners by up to 225 by 2024-25 working in Long-Term Care homes to ensure that residents continue to receive safe, high-quality care.

Final Thoughts

In addition to future waves of COVID-19, with the increased spread of Monkeypox and the upcoming flu season, it’s reassuring to see the provincial government make short-term and long-term action plans to improve the quality of care for patients and reduce staff shortages.

Unless there is another important announcement like this one, the articles for the next few weeks will be about some reasons how and why the staff shortages of healthcare workers got to this point, health experts’ other ideas to address this problem, and what more government funding for privatized healthcare in Ontario could look like.

Click [here](#) if you’re interested in learning more about telemedicine healthcare options.

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at www.ontario.ca/coronavirus. Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675