

HALDIMAND HORIZON

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SPRING IS IN FULL SWING

Signs of winter have vanished from Haldimand's landscape, overtaken by signs of spring. Rick Grant captured these beautiful daffodils. Do you have a photo you'd like to share for our Haldimand Horizon? Email it to us at news@haldimandpress.com with a short description, including where it was taken. Photos must be a high resolution JPEG. Publication is not guaranteed.

Ontario optometrists overwhelmingly vote to withdraw OHIP services unless Province covers costs

By Mike Renzella
The Haldimand Press

HALDIMAND—Ontario's optometrists say they are being shortchanged by the Provincial government – and they've had enough. Nearly all of the province's optometrists, 96%, have voted to stop accepting OHIP-covered service by September 1, 2021 if the Province doesn't step up their funding.

According to a press release issued by the Ontario Association of Optometrists (OAO), the Provincial government currently covers only 55% of expenses related to the costs of an OHIP-insured eye exam, with clinics absorbing the remaining 45% out of pocket. With over four million OHIP covered services administered yearly in the province and clinics under immense financial strain, OAO asserts that this system is no longer sustainable.

"Government neglect has jeopardized access to eye care for those who need it most, undervaluing the eye health of Ontarians," said OAO President Sheldon Salaba. "Optometrists are being fair and reasonable. We only ask that the government commit to cover at least the cost of service delivery, and we're giving them lots of notice to avoid any impact on patients."

The press release claims that optometrists have never been given the opportunity to engage in any sort of formal negotiation process with the Province, despite this occurring for other health care providers who offer OHIP-funded services.

"Vision is our most important sense, and our political leaders must help us to protect it," said Salaba. "After almost three years in office, it's time for action from Premier Ford and Minister Elliot."

A local social media post asked residents to contact Haldimand County MPP Toby Barrett to voice their concerns over the upcoming withdrawal.

"My office has been working with (optometrists) on their latest approach to this," said Barrett. "I can honestly say that I've been working on behalf of the optometrists for the last year or so. I have been sending their petitions into the Ontario Legislature."

He added, "The problem is this OHIP formula has been around for about 30 years and it probably served the profession well when it was first brought in, however the optometrist that we've been speaking with for the last year has indicated that it makes it very difficult to stay in business."

Barrett mentioned how it is important to keep access

open for those who rely on OHIP funding, including those under 19, over 65, people with eye diseases, and diabetics, all of whom are covered for subsidized eye care services: "The profession has made it clear to us that they're subsidizing the OHIP system and they're losing money doing it – and it puts them in a position where they've got to find other ways to balance the books."

As for why the Ministry of Health has not formally addressed the issue: "I'm thinking part of the problem, with so many issues, if it's not COVID-related it doesn't get the attention that it normally would get," said Barrett. "If it hadn't been for the advent of this virus ... this would be a priority, but the Ministry of Health is so overwhelmed with this infectious disease."

Barret is not aware of any specific plans or proposals forthcoming at this time: "I know the Ministry wants to work with optometrists. I've discussed it with some of my MPP colleagues as well, but it's just the challenges day by day.... I can't predict what the plans are between now and September."

Salaba said this is not a new issue, however: "The underfunding problem has been going on for decades. During the past 30 years, we have exhausted all options to secure a commitment from the Ontario government to adequately invest in optometric care."

According to Salaba, optometrists in Ontario absorb a combined expense of \$173 million per year in the current arrangement: "Unfortunately, we are at a breaking point and have no choice but to take action in order to get the government to resolve the funding crisis and create a sustainable primary eye health care system."

The OAO is asking the Provincial government to commit to a formal negotiation process with an end goal of ending out-of-pocket expenses for optometrists to see OHIP patients. Should the period of time pass without a resolution, OHIP-insured patients will no longer be able to procure services from optometrists, even if they carry their own insurance. Any OHIP covered services will require patients to seek out help elsewhere.

"We ask that readers please contact their local MPP and urge them to have the government prioritize eye care. Stand with us so that you and your family can continue to access high quality eye care that is timely and close to home," summed up Salaba. For more information, visit SaveEye-Care.ca.

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