



“ A strong partnership between our governments will help ensure collective success.



The Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC) represents the interests of the 15 upper-tier and single-tier counties in rural Western Ontario, including 300 communities within its geographic boundaries and 1.5 million people to whom the region is home.

In doing so, the WOWC always strives for partnership, collaboration, and dialogue with other levels of government – and embodies these values in its advocacy efforts in the spirit of maintaining and supporting the critical relationship with the Province of Ontario.

Together, both levels of government must use their expertise and collective regional knowledge to work through our mutual priorities. The challenges facing municipalities, particularly small and rural communities, are on the rise – from housing to workforce, and mental health and addictions to homelessness.

Investing in municipal services will lay foundations for the continued recovery and future prosperity of our communities, and the research and data collection conducted by the WOWC demonstrates the importance of this ongoing support for

rural Western Ontario – much like other rural communities across the province.

The WOWC has conducted significant research on its priority issues and is proposing concrete solutions to address the challenges in rural Western Ontario. Being part of the process and the conversation will be crucial as we move forward. This partnership between our governments will help ensure collective success for both Western Ontario and the Province of Ontario as a whole. Governments need to be all in this together.

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COMMUNITIES SERVED

ACROSS 15 UPPER-TIER AND
SINGLE-TIER MUNICIPALITIES



250k

**BUSINESSES
OPERATING**



1.5m

PEOPLE REPRESENTED

HOUSING



The lack of housing continues to be a direct hindrance on the prosperity and growth of rural Western Ontario, affecting the health and well-being of its residents as well as its economic development potential. Given the current housing and rental market, it is also critical to focus on increasing the supply of attainable and affordable housing of all forms, both for rent and for ownership.

The **Western Ontario Workforce Strategy** has identified that the region will require 173,000 new housing units by 2041. The WOWC therefore wishes to reiterate its support for the government's efforts to increase the supply of housing, to improve housing affordability, and to build 1.5 million homes across Ontario by 2031.

The WOWC also wishes to recognize the increased collaboration and partnership with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, including the opportunity to attend the first-ever Housing Forum in late November 2023. As the WOWC has previously stated, the Province must ensure that rural municipalities are adequately consulted and invited to the table for any and all such discussions and consultations – just like their urban counterparts.

The rural voice needs to be heard, and rural housing needs are very different and distinct than in large cities. Moving forward, the WOWC would appreciate maintaining the same access as our large urban counterparts for future consultations with the Province – and looks forward to building upon this relationship following the arrival of Minister Calandra and the subsequent changes that have been implemented.



The WOWC wishes to recognize that the government is developing an attainable housing program, using insights and ideas from municipalities and partners in the housing sector – and looks forward to being included as a key stakeholder as part of the forthcoming consultations regarding the definition of “attainable” housing.

In a similar vein, the WOWC is eager to engage in upcoming consultations with the Province regarding the impacts of the **More Homes Built Faster Act** and municipalities’ ability to fund growth-related infrastructure to support the construction of new homes, including a review of the five-year phase-in of development charge increases and fee refund framework.

Finally, the WOWC requests further clarity from the government regarding its previous commitment to make municipalities “whole” regarding a loss of development charge revenue. As announced by the Province in December 2023, future consultations on this matter intend to “inform potential legislative changes for the government’s upcoming Housing Supply Action Plan that would enhance municipalities’ ability to invest in housing-enabling infrastructure.”

The WOWC supports any efforts that would enhance the ability of municipalities – particularly small and rural municipalities – to invest in housing-related infrastructure, such as water, wastewater, and roads.

Rural Western Ontario is committed to being a part of the housing solution, and helping Ontario achieve its goals by 2031.

HOMELESSNESS



The WOWC would like to recognize the Province's investment in the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) and the increase in funding in last year's budget. Despite these efforts, homelessness continues to increase in small and rural communities, and Service Managers across rural Western Ontario are struggling to respond to the growing need for homelessness resources.

Rural communities require an increased fair share in HPP funding given the specific growing strain for rural communities. As homelessness continues to increase in rural areas, Service Managers within the WOWC region are struggling to respond to the growing need for resources. In some cases, the funding delivered through Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (often located in urban areas) is simply not adequate to meet the growing needs in rural areas.

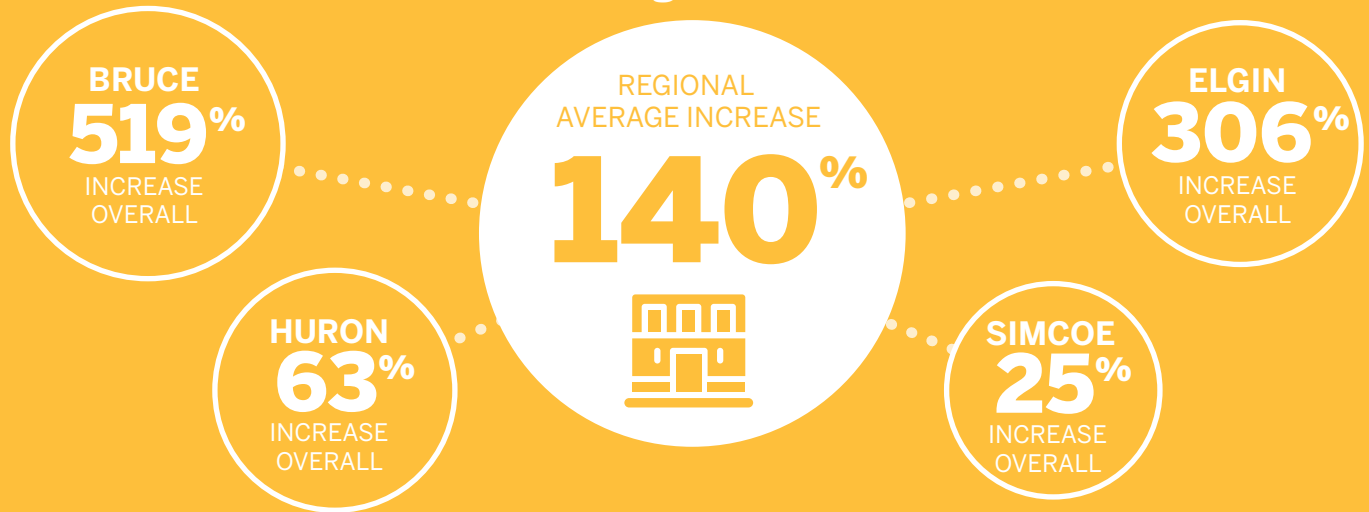
The WOWC has collected data from rural regional Service Managers from 2018 to 2022, which demonstrates a

steady increase in homelessness-related services required. Although these are similar issues to what large urban cities are reporting, the rural/small/remote challenge creates significant strain, as these communities are not resourced in the same way as urban areas.

The WOWC wishes to reiterate to the Province of Ontario that small and rural areas do not benefit from economies of scale and require more funding to meet the same service standards as larger areas. This has also proven to be the case when working and consulting with other health-sector colleagues.

The WOWC therefore requests that a separate stream of HPP funding be allocated specifically for rural communities, which are less equipped, with fewer resources, yet experiencing significant increases in services required for homelessness, often related to mental health and addictions.

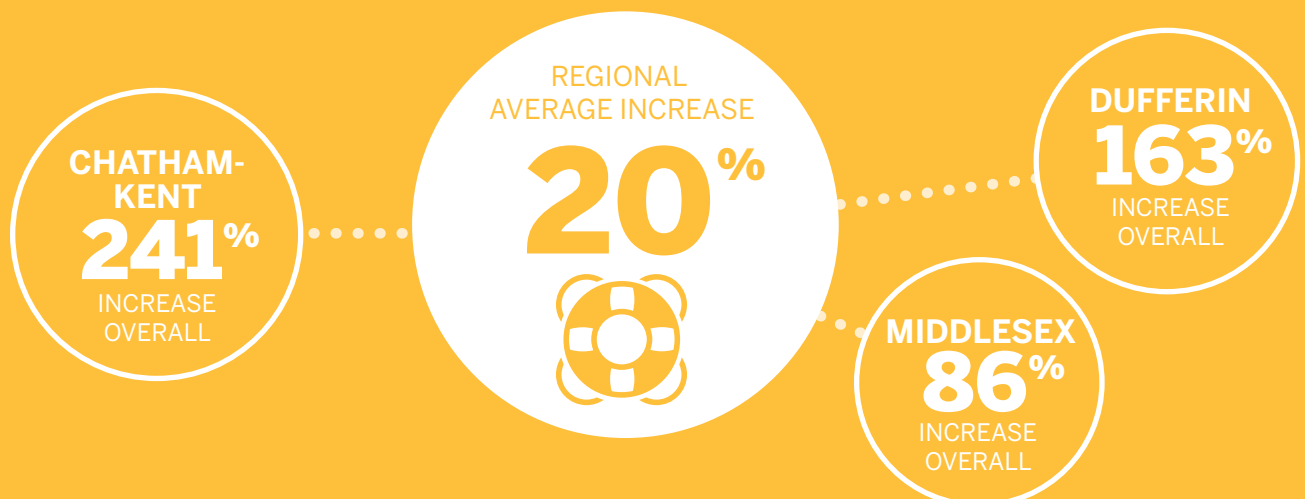
Shelter Usage Over 5 Years



Housing Wait List Over 5 Years



Social Assistance Clients With No Known Address Over 5 Years



MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS



The mental health and addictions epidemic is deeply affecting and impacting communities in small and rural municipalities, which have even fewer resources to tackle this growing problem – and where a lack of access to adequate community health services, and integrated mental health and addictions services, is a major barrier to reducing homelessness and poverty.

The WOWC requests that the Solicitor General and the Ministry of Health be on board as full partners in researching and implementing solutions for these growing needs in rural Western Ontario. The WOWC greatly appreciated the opportunity to be involved and considered for the Community Response Pilot Project, and its municipalities look forward to additional opportunities to consult and work

directly with the government on finding mutual solutions for the well-being of our communities.

The WOWC has the knowledge, experience, and local connections to help make a difference in our communities. With the appropriate financial support, and collaboration with the Province, all levels of government can together address these needs and accomplish positive change.

The WOWC would also like to reiterate its support to the Province for permanent funding of the Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT) program across Ontario. This is a critical support for our police forces to be paired with experienced mental health professionals in response to the substantial increase in mental health calls.



“Communities have benefited from pairing specially trained police officers and mental-health professionals.

Communities in rural Western Ontario have felt the direct benefits from the pairing of specially trained police officers and mental-health professionals to respond to 911 emergency calls involving mental health or addictions. This funding had been delivered from the Province to various police forces and their partners through case-by-case, application-based grant funding.

It has been recommended by multiple stakeholders, including the Ontario Provincial Police, that these programs should be made permanent, through annualized funding. The WOWC looks forward to discussing the MCRT program and opportunities for an expansion of these efforts in small and rural communities – or alternatively, having a better understanding of the Province’s vision for the future of this program, and how the WOWC and its communities can better support its existence, moving forward.

WORKFORCE TO SUPPORT ECONOMIC GROWTH



There has been an ongoing focus for the WOWC over the past few years on workforce retention and expansion, which has been highlighted in the collaborative regional work through the **Western Ontario Workforce Strategy**. There are several actions in the Strategy that can be implemented, provided there is sufficient funding.

The WOWC member municipalities are committed to working together to ensure there is sufficient workforce today and tomorrow to achieve the region's economic potential and support key industry sectors.

WOWC members recognize the power of regional collaboration, and face many of the same challenges as other sectors across Ontario: attracting more newcomers, educating youth about career opportunities in their own backyard, and recalibrating post-secondary education to meet emerging demand. These efforts would assist with the estimated 214,000 jobs to be filled across the WOWC region by 2030.

The WOWC is requesting your support in our most recent proposal for a Regional Workforce Attraction Campaign. The proposal is a practical blueprint, with measurable outcomes, for moving forward in a spirit of positive cooperation with the WOWC's partners. This Attraction Campaign will create a strong WOWC workforce attraction and retention brand that represents the collaborative efforts of the member municipalities, and which can be broken into municipal sub-brand items as required.

The WOWC proposes to build a campaign website to house public information to inform and build awareness of broad career opportunities, current job opportunities, community features and amenities, to attract and retain workers and residents targeted to identified personas. In addition, a regional workforce attraction and retention campaign would be developed to promote the features and benefits of Western Ontario and individual member municipalities.



Across the WOWC region, there are several initiatives focused on attracting people to specific communities. The WOWC should broaden those resident attraction efforts to support all communities in the region. The WOWC can support the development and implementation of resident and workforce attraction efforts in a variety of forms such as building the regional brand, raising awareness of job and career opportunities, and expanding online information to support attraction efforts.

Without a substantial influx of new workers, the local population in the WOWC region will not be able to supply workforce demand through 2030 or 2040. The WOWC looks forward to continuing discussions, and requests that the government consult with small and rural municipalities to better achieve mutual goals.

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Top 5 In-Demand Sectors



MANUFACTURING



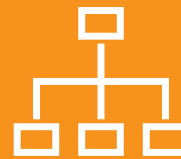
**HEALTH CARE
& SOCIAL ASSISTANCE**



CONSTRUCTION



RETAIL TRADE



**ADMINISTRATION
& SUPPORT**

Forecast Additional Jobs by Sector, 2030

*WOWC region includes replacement and growth demand. Source: EMSI



29,922

MANUFACTURING



28,265

**HEALTH CARE
& SOCIAL ASSISTANCE**



21,304

CONSTRUCTION



20,286

RETAIL TRADE



12,355

**ADMINISTRATION
& SUPPORT**

Federal, Provincial and municipal partners must continue to work together on priorities, from workforce and housing challenges to social services and health care improvements. Investing in these municipal services will lay foundations for the continued recovery and future prosperity of our communities.



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