



Friday, January 26, 2024

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance
c/o Budget Secretariat
Frost Building North, 3rd Floor
95 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1Z1

Re: WOWC Submission to Provincial 2024 Budget Consultations

Dear Minister Bethlenfalvy,

On behalf of the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC), thank you for this opportunity to provide a submission to the Provincial government on the Ontario 2024 Budget consultations.

The WOWC is a not-for-profit organization representing 15 upper and single-tier municipalities and 1.5 million residents across Southwestern Ontario, aiming to enhance the prosperity and overall well-being of rural and small urban communities across the region. The WOWC is a strong partner and supporter of the provincial government, and our members look forward to continuing the excellent collaboration between the Province of Ontario and the municipalities in Southwestern Ontario.

Together, both levels of government must use their expertise and collective regional knowledge to work through our mutual priorities – from workforce and housing challenges to social services and health care improvements. Investing in municipal services will lay foundations for the continued recovery and future prosperity of our communities. The WOWC's recommendations for the 2024 Pre-Budget Consultations are with respect to two envelopes of funding.

Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) for Rural Areas

The mental health and addictions epidemic is deeply affecting and impacting the communities in small and rural municipalities, which have even fewer resources to tackle this growing problem. The WOWC requests that the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Solicitor General (SOLGEN) be on board as full partners, particularly in our small and rural communities, 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 would like to recognize the Province's investment in the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) and the increase in funding through the 2023 Budget. Homelessness, however, 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. The WOWC requests that 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.

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 smaller areas do not benefit from economies of scale and require more funding to meet the same service standards as larger areas. This is also the case when working with other health-sector colleagues. The WOWC would like to offer to be a pilot for any new projects, should such funding become available.

Permanent Funding for Mobile Crisis Response Teams (MCRT)

In addition, the WOWC's meetings with regional stakeholders have revealed the excellent collaboration and multi-partner efforts that are being undertaken in rural Southwestern Ontario to address the growing mental health and addictions crisis. One of the best examples of such partnerships are the Mobile Crisis Response Teams (MCRT) – also known under various other names – which combine front-line OPP officers with mental-health workers, to apply new approaches to police interventions and provide additional support and follow-up to individuals.

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. To date, however, this funding has been delivered from the Province to various police forces and their partners through case-by-case, application-based grant funding – for example, through the MCRT Enhancement Grant delivered by SOLGEN.



The WOWC therefore recommends and requests the permanence of these programs – through annualized funding and permanently-funded mental health officer positions – using a formula based on the number of calls, population size, and geographic area.

This permanent, predictable funding would provide much-needed stability to our partners providing these services to our communities. These service providers are stretched thin and have noted that these programs could eventually be expanded to provide more resources – in some cases up to 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Being part of the process and the conversation will be crucial as we move forward. This strong partnership between our governments will help ensure collective success for both Southwestern Ontario and the Province of Ontario as a whole. Governments need to be all in this together.

Sincerely,

Warden Glen McNeil
Chair, Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus