

Complex System | Clearly Defined



Articles that explore health care issues in our LHIN

Health Human Resources a competitive, professional business

Communities across Ontario find themselves in a competition to locate, attract and retain health care professionals to their area. In many areas it has escalated into a “what-can-we-do-for-you” type of aggressive campaign to secure physicians and medical staff, but local efforts have found success using a more personal approach.

“We have found that it’s more important to look at “the fit”... We look for someone who likes the community, likes the location and likes what we have to offer. The worst thing we could do is recruit and two years down the road, they’re miserable and leave,” said Frances Roesch, Director of Medical Affairs and Medical Recruitment at Chatham-Kent Health Alliance (CKHA). “We don’t just look at the needs of the physician, we look at their spouse, children and family needs,” added Roesch. She explained that part of the strategy is to make sure the potential physician and family fits into the community. “We look at employment needs for the spouse; the children’s needs – schools, sports, interests; religious needs – churches of their faith... We

want the family to be happy where they are living, we want them to stay and call it home,” said Roesch.

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The communities within the Erie St. Clair Local Health Integration Network (ESC LHIN) are currently underserved by about 124 general family practitioners and have found themselves in a high-stakes industry where a tour of the facilities and a steak dinner is no longer enough.

At the high end of the scale there is competition like Belleville, ON which offered up to \$150,000 to physicians who would promise to practice for a minimum of five years in that community. Money talks, as 10 medical students agreed to finish their training and set up practice in that municipality. Similar success was realized in neighbouring Hastings County who offered the same deal and signed nine doctors-in-training.

In Ignace, Northern Ontario, the small town purchased a \$185,000 house on the lake as bait to reel in a physician.

So how have communities in the ESC LHIN been able to compete? CKHA has been proactive in the battle for many years. The Every Life Counts campaign for physician recruitment has funded smaller, more personal incentives for physicians and medical staff. CKHA’s medical recruitment office has organized spe-



cial recognition events such as Home for the Holidays and participated in broader initiatives like Doctor's Day. Medical Recruitment staff attend the Health Professional Recruitment Tour, that visit medical schools every year, in hopes to secure medical students or residents nearing the end of their training who may have ties to the community or an interest in the area.

"It's all about relationship-building, it's a trust, we ask them what their ideal practice would look like and we see how they would best fit into the vacancies in our area... We want them to choose us, not us selling them on Chatham-Kent. It's the difference between being sold something and buying what you really want," explained Roesch. And their approach is working. In 2008, Chatham-Kent recruited five family physicians and two specialists. Chatham-Kent is still underserved by approximately 30 general family practitioners.

In January of this year an on-site staff fitness facility was opened as part of the healthy workplace strategy. The initiative was in direct response to a CKHA staff online survey which asked employees "Tell us what it takes to be YOUR Top 100 Employer". CKHA staff, physicians, volunteers and students pay a membership to the revenue-neutral fitness centre. It's small and unique benefits like this that make physicians and staff feel more at home.

The severe shortage of family doctors is not unique to Ontario, but is a reality across Canada. It is estimated that five million Canadians currently do not have a family doctor. The task of attracting and retaining medical professionals used to be handled by volunteer groups or committees within specific areas, but the gravity of the situation has seen the need for full-time professional recruiters in a lot of communities. In 2004 the Canadian Association of Staff Physician Recruiters was founded. Chatham-Kent's Roesch was the founding treasurer among its roster of 100 members. Although the members are all competing for the same limited number of physicians, Roesch says it's more of network where they work together. "It's friendly competition... a network of professionals working together. If we can't place a physician here, we encourage placement within our

LHIN, but if that doesn't fit, we do refer them on, which reflects positively on our community as well," she said.



Within the ESC LHIN there are several localized recruitment and retention committees, most are vol-

unteer based with part or full-time professional recruiters. In South Essex County the Leamington and Area Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee is financially supported through municipal taxation from the Municipality of Leamington. Although, still a volunteer group, they have partnered with Leamington

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District Memorial Hospital Foundation and the LDMH Board to unify their efforts. In its five years of service to the community, the Committee has recruited one surgeon, three family physicians and four ER staff.

In the northern reaches of ESC LHIN is the Physician Recruitment Task Force of Sarnia-Lambton, a volunteer Board of Directors with the goal of attracting and retaining family physicians and other primary health care workers. The group also has one full-time physician recruitment coordinator dedicated to physician recruitment. The Committee hosts a Welcome Home weekend for medical students to tour and enjoy the area in hopes of enticing them to move to the area and set up practice.

In Windsor the Regional Physician Recruitment Office for Windsor/Essex works full-time to find and recruit new health care professionals to the area. Because of its proximity to the United States border, Windsor attracts many American-trained doctors

who enjoy the potential to make more money with an abundance of patients. Approximately 40 per cent of new doctors to the Windsor area have come from the U.S.

While area-specific recruitment committees and groups address individual needs and



recruitment tactics, the ESC LHIN is working full-time for the recruitment and retention of health care professionals.

Provincial programs supporting and augmenting local community recruitment and retention initiatives are currently in place and new ones

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continue to be developed. “The province recognizes the formidable task communities face in their health care recruitment endeavours.” says Laurie Nash, Partnership Coordinator – Erie St Clair, with the Health-ForceOntario Marketing and Recruitment Agency (HFO MRA).

The HFO MRA is a provincial government agency that was established to help Ontarians have access to the right number and mix of health care providers, when and where

they are needed.

As a Partnership Coordinator, Nash helps communities and health care professionals take advantage of provincial programs and resources. These include HFOJobs, a free web portal for physician and nurse postings; REAP, an expense reimbursement program to help physicians who are relocating to the province pay for moving and licensing costs; the Nursing Graduate Guarantee, which ensures that every new Nursing graduate (RN and RPN) has the opportunity to work full-time in Ontario; and advisors who work one-on-one with physicians on issues such as licensing and immigration.

“Equally important is identifying common issues, challenges, barriers and trends that affect successful recruitment and retention of health care professionals.” says Nash.

“The information that Partnership Coordinators provide regarding regional issues assists in the development of new programs supporting local community health care recruitment and retention from the province.”

At present, 99 communities in Southern Ontario have been designated as underserved by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The delivery of health services depends on trained health care professionals, because of the shortage of these professional groups however, communities across the province are also looking at new ways to deliver health services. Innovative approaches like TeleHealth and utilization of other care providers ensure communities still have access to service without the complete reliance on a physician.

With the escalating challenges of health human resource recruitment the health care system has to plan, change and develop new strategies to ensure we build a strong, sustainable health care system that our communities can rely on.

