



## We are the West Elgin Community Health Centre...

The West Elgin Community Health Centre (“the Centre”) has served our clients and rural communities for more than 30 years. We offer primary care, mental health services, diabetes education, dietitian services, child and youth programming including supporting young children without a primary care provider, health promotion and systems navigation, as well as our community support and assisted living programs for seniors and adults with disabilities.

Our Centre is fully funded by the Ministry of Health and Ontario Health. Unfortunately, over the past 16 years inflation has risen by about 40% while the Centre has received only 7% in base funding adjustments for that same period. During that time, we have faced increases to our operating costs, a widening healthcare sector wage gap impacting our ability to retain and attract healthcare professionals, and growing waitlists for the Centre’s programs and services. Our Centre will also be tasked to do more with retiring community family physicians, new industries in St. Thomas and Dutton’s new developments.

Not only are we challenged to retain and attract scarce healthcare resources today but with the removal of our historical catchment area, we feel the pressure every day. We currently have 423 people on our primary care wait list representing 40% from the Chatham area and 14% from Middlesex County. Our Centre is at escalating risk to maintain its current level of care let alone be positioned for growth.

## Our Advocacy and Why It Matters

Community Health Centres (“CHC”) serve clients who face the most significant barriers to care, have the poorest health outcomes, and have been disproportionately affected by chronic diseases, respiratory illnesses, mental health and addictions, among others. West Elgin is no different. However, we need sustainable and adequate funding to maintain our capacity to deliver exceptional care to our clients and communities. To do so, we must foremost uplift and value our amazing community healthcare professionals by paying equitable, competitive healthcare wages that our staff deserve. In an already strained healthcare workforce, the growing wage disparity among healthcare sectors is narrowing our ability to attract and retain exceptional healthcare professionals to West Elgin.

Over the past year Centre and Community representatives have advocated with all levels of the Government regarding the Centre’s lack of base funding increases and its impact. Recently, our advocacy included a petition signed by nearly 800 individuals from the surrounding communities. In our local MPP and the Ontario Minister of Health’s responses, they both stated, “community health centres are independent employers responsible for their staff compensation packages.” This is a misleading message.

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*“What an amazing resource with amazing staff! This community is so fortunate to have the supports of the WEHC!”*  
– TB, Facebook post

*“I am forever grateful for WEHC. You are an immeasurable resource for our communities!”* – TM, Facebook post

*“You continue to be such an integral part of West Elgin! I consider it an honour and privilege to have been a part of your supportive work. Congratulations on 30 Years”* – CV, LinkedIn post

Our Centre is funded differently than other healthcare sectors. We are governed by a funder MSAA agreement stating that our Centre cannot carry a deficit, and any funding changes require prior funder approval. There are also restrictions about how our funding, including salary lines, are allocated and spent.

Could we pay some positions on par with hospital wages within our existing budget? Perhaps, but at what cost to our community health services? We would likely have to eliminate jobs, programs, and services. Which vital program and service within our interdisciplinary model of care would be terminated? We believe that such an action would contradict Dr. Jane Philpott's vision for an integrated primary care model. In fact, our Centre is unique. We are the only Ontario CHC receiving community support services funding. We believe that the West Elgin Community Health Centre's integrated primary care model exemplifies what Dr. Jane Philpott envisions for primary healthcare in Ontario.

Let's not forget about the significant staff compensation impact from the fallout of Bill 124. The Ontario Government imposed legislation limiting public sector compensation increases to 1% annually for 3 years. During the pandemic our Centre complied despite drastic increases to our group insurance benefits year-over-year. We could not afford any sustainable cost-of-living salary adjustments during this 3-year period.

When Bill 124 was deemed unconstitutional in 2023, it further weakened an already strained healthcare system. Fortunately, for some healthcare sectors, such as hospitals, they were able to make salary adjustments typically through an arbitrated remedy. Bill 124 devalued and demoralized our amazing West Elgin healthcare team. The Government has paid out \$6 billion dollars in retroactive salaries since Bill 124 and our Centre has not received any new funding to make it right.

Yes, we lost long-serving staff post Bill 124 notably two mental health therapists to hospitals for 30% more salary. Recruiting for a registered nurse will also be difficult with the wage gap between community health and hospitals now at approximately \$28,000 per year. Our full-time nurse practitioner job posting has been vacant since March 2024, and we failed to recruit a Chiropractor. Chiropractic candidates are seeking at least 50% more base salary than our ability to pay. And, after 20 years of providing Chiropractic services, the Centre had to sunset this service offering RPN-led foot care as an alternative.

It is noteworthy to share that a proposal was submitted to our funder requesting to add new primary health providers and allied healthcare professionals to serve our growing service demands especially since the Centre has operated without a catchment area. Our request for new staff funding was declined.

Through strong leadership and a compassionate work culture, we have mitigated some immediate staff turnover threats, however, with post pandemic inflation, scarce healthcare resources, increased client demands, growing wait lists, retiring area family physicians, and significant wage disparities among healthcare sectors, we do, and will continue to, struggle to retain staff for the long-term and to attract healthcare professionals for West Elgin in a very competitive, scarcely resourced, healthcare environment.

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