

New health-care master touts new era in local delivery

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Its name is a mouthful and not especially illuminating to its purpose.

But as local public bodies go, the newly formed Hamilton-Niagara-Haldimand-Brant Local Health Integration Network – or LHIN for short -- is about as big and important as they get.

It will oversee a local budget of \$2.5 billion and be responsible for planning, coordinating and funding health services for more than 1.3 million residents living in an area stretching from Fort Erie to Flamborough and many points in between, including Hamilton, Brantford, Burlington, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls.

One of 14 across the province, the LHIN was created in April by the government of Premier Dalton McGuinty with the promise of providing more local say (v)7(er)5.3(h)-5.8(e)4.8(alth-c)2(ar)4.92e spe

While skeptics fear the real result will be service cuts, the head of the Hamilton-area LHIN instead sees opportunities to free up more resources by getting health agencies to work together, rather than in "silos."

Juanita Gledhill, chair of the new LHIN's board of directors, said the goal is to provide better service, including by tailoring delivery to local needs.

Ontario is the last province to decentralize health care, she said, attributing much of the resistance to LHINs to the experience in BC, where changes were introduced as the government was restructuring hospitals.

"At the same time that they decentralized, they did massive cuts. The restructuring of hospitals happened here seven or eight years ago," Ms. Gledhill said.

"I think there was a great fear when LHINs were introduced that the same thing was going to happen here. In fact, we need to be talking about how do we recruit and retrain people in health care. How do we make this a place where people want to work and have a career?"

"At the end of the day, it's a human service. You need people to deliver health care. You can have all the plans you want, but you need people to deliver it."

Not everyone is enthusiastically embracing the new LHIN, including those who heard similar promises when the previous Conservative government created Community Access Care Centres to oversee local home care.

Instead of improving the situation, many have run into budget problems. Hamilton's CCAC, for instance, is grappling with a \$3.6-million deficit and last month told staff it needs to cut 9,400 hours of home-care service per week for the rest of the year -- cuts presently under review.

Under the new LHIN structure, the Hamilton CCAC will now amalgamate with other area CCACs, raising questions about how "local" the focus will be.

Julie Lenko, who represents the CCAC's unionized case managers and support staff, said there hasn't been enough information to assess the impact of LHINs, but she doesn't expect them to solve anything without more funding.

She worries a larger geographic area will result in more disruption, including as a result of intense pressure to free up hospital beds.

"If it means grandma's going out to (a nursing home in) Niagara and they get their bed, then grandma's going to Niagara," Ms. Lenko predicted.

"There's nothing local about it," she said. "I'm working in a field where I know it's going to have an impact, but I can't speak to exactly how it's going to impact because the information just hasn't been relayed to us."

The Hamilton-area LHIN is presently trying increase public awareness and soliciting input on 10 strategies to improve local health care.

The strategies will be part of an Integrated Health Services Plan that will be submitted to the province by the end of the month. Their common thrust is better coordination of services, including on workplace injuries and illness, mental health and addiction, home care and end-of-life care.

A consultation document and feedback forms are available by calling the LHIN office in Grimsby at 1-866-363-5466 or visiting its Web site at hnhblhin.on.ca.

Public comments have also been solicited through a series of open houses, including ones held last week at Sherwood Public Library and the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce's headquarters.

"That's pretty direct input into health care planning and we haven't seen a lot of that historically," Ms. Gledhill said, noting the services plan will be updated yearly.

"If we're missing things, it's a living document and we need to be doing the planning for the future as well, so we need to hear that."