

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Balanced Budget: Improving Health Care and Education

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OHIP+ and Health Care Investments

I spoke to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce last week about Ontario's recently released 2017 Ontario Budget called A Stronger, Healthier Ontario. I'm proud to say this is Ontario's first balanced budget since the devastating global recession of 2008, thanks to a strong economy and fiscal management.

As a leader in economic growth (the fastest growth among the G7 nations), Ontario is set to not just balance the budget this year, but also to maintain a balanced budget for the next two years. The good news ? a balanced budget means more funding for the programs and services you rely on most. This budget lets us invest in people and the province, and it delivers for people here in our community.

With a balanced budget we are launching OHIP+: Children and Youth Pharmacare. Starting January 1, 2018, prescription medications for children and youth under 24 across Ontario will be free. Through OHIP+: Children and Youth Pharmacare Program, coverage will be automatic regardless of family income, with no upfront costs, and no strings attached.

As I was listening to the details of the new OHIP+, I couldn't help but think about a young boy who grew up in Aurora more than a century ago. That boy would grow up to become a soldier in the Great War, a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and Canada's 14th Prime Minister.

That young boy was Lester B. Pearson.

Pearson had many great achievements in his time at the helm of our nation, but perhaps the most important and enduring was the introduction of universal health care. Of course, his vision of universal health care included pharmacare and has, for these last fifty years, remained incomplete and unfinished. Ontario has taken a huge stride forward.

Under this program, over four million Ontario children and youth will have publicly funded access to 4,400 medications.

OHIP+ represents a major step toward universal drug coverage for people in the province. Our provincial drug funding program is already one of the country's most generous, and now, as the first province to introduce universal pharmacare for children and youth, Ontario is once again leading the way. It's not always easy for families to make ends meet. Not everyone can count on benefit plans through their work. But that shouldn't mean having to choose between paying for the medications their kids need and putting food on the table or keeping a roof overhead. Through this program, we're giving our children and youth a better and healthier start, and making it easier for families.

The 2017 budget will also be increasing health care investments by \$11.5 billion over the next three years. This investment will improve access to care, expand mental health and addiction services, and enhance the experience and recovery of patients. It includes \$1.3 billion to further reduce wait times.

I was honoured last Friday to be at Southlake Regional Health Centre to announce an additional \$5.7 million in funding for the hospital for 2017/18. This brings our government's funding to more than \$286 million a year. Southlake is an incredible facility, filled with skilled and compassionate staff, and touching the lives of our families, friends and neighbours. I will continue to push for the funds at Queen's Park that allow it to grow to meet our needs.

There was also good news on Ontario's new Dementia Strategy, it will improve and better coordinate services for those living with dementia and their caregivers by providing more than \$100 million over three years. This will include funding to expand province-wide access to community programs and other investments to enhance access to care, information and support when a diagnosis is made.

Improving Education

With an additional investment of \$6.4 billion over three years, the balanced 2017 Budget reflects the government's commitment to help students reach their full potential by supporting them from full-day kindergarten to postsecondary education and beyond. The Province continues to construct new schools, including in our area, and renew existing ones to create nurturing environments where children can learn and grow. The province is providing almost \$16 billion over 10 years to help build and improve schools.

Making Life More Affordable

To make everyday life more affordable, the balanced 2017 Budget is strengthening the public services that matter most to people, while lowering costs. The Province is helping 100,000 more children get affordable, quality licensed childcare. In 2017/18, Ontario

will support child care for 24,000 more children up to four years old through new fee subsidy spaces and support for new licensed child care spaces in schools. The government will continue to work with schools and municipalities to fund the expansion of school-, community- and home-based licensed care that is convenient, flexible and in-line with parents' needs.

Overall, the 2017 budget includes many investments that help improve the everyday lives of people across the province and right here in Newmarket-Aurora, ensuring our children and grandchildren will benefit and thrive.

As always, I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. My email is: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org. I look forward to hearing from you.