

Deputy Premier, Minister of Health is 'honoured to serve'

By Brock Weir

When Christine Elliott was elected Newmarket-Aurora's MPP this past spring, she came into the job after a year and a half as Ontario's Patient Ombudsman.

This experience advocating for the needs of Ontario patients navigating the health care system were recognized by newly elected Premier Doug Ford when crafting his cabinet.

Earlier this summer, Ms. Elliott was appointed the Province's new Minister of Health and Long Term Care, with the added portfolio of serving as Deputy Premier of Ontario.

'I was very honoured to be asked to serve as Deputy Premier in addition to being the Minister of Health,' Ms. Elliott tells The Auroran. 'The Premier and I work very well together and I am there to support him in whatever needs to be done, filling in on days in Question Period where he is unable to be there, and any other activities that come up when he needs some assistance.'

Taking on the role as Minister of Health is something she says she feels 'really comfortable' considering her background in the health care field. Although Ms. Elliott came into public life as a lawyer, rather than as a health care professional, she was tasked with health care issues from her earliest days as an opposition MPP in the shadow cabinet of then-PC leader John Tory. This background was subsequently recognized by former Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, who appointed Ms. Elliott with the role of Patient Ombudsman.

'I feel I got a lot of experience understanding our healthcare system from the perspective of patients and families, and that is really important as we try to move our health care system to one that is truly patient-focused,' says Ms. Elliott. 'That is something I will always keep in mind as I do my work in this Ministry.'

Healthcare is something that effects every family and is a part of Canada and Ontario Ms. Elliott says 'we're all very, very proud of' but pride doesn't mean the system is perfect, she adds. There are 'stresses and strains, particularly with an aging population' that have to be addressed.

'We need to have at least a 10 year plan from where we are right now in healthcare to where we want to be,' she says. 'Every decision we make in the next four years of our mandate should be based on that plan and how it moves forward on that plan. That plan has to be developed in consultation with the people of Ontario, listening to the needs and concerns of health care professionals because they are the ones who are delivering the service, and they also have some very good and innovative ideas about how to improve our system. My role, especially at this point, is primarily to listen and learn about what those priorities are.'

'We know it is more long-term care beds, we know we need more assistance in mental health and addictions and to create a true system for people who require mental health and assistance treatments. There are many other areas where we need to act. We need to listen, learn and then develop that plan and work to execute the plan, because if you try and make random decision here and there you're not really going to improve the system. You may improve things randomly, but we want to create an entire system that is stronger and better.'

While there were many challenges in the system identified under the previous government, Ms. Elliott says one of the positives was the very creation of the Patient Ombudsman role because the 'patient voice has seldom been heard in making healthcare decisions. There was also the installation of a Minister's Advisory Board Panel which Ms. Elliott says has provided 'critical' input from 'wonderful people.'

'I know the previous government had started to strengthen our mental health and addiction systems, but there are many other steps that need to be taken and we're going to take a look at that plan. We have ideas of our own about what we would like to see happen, so we're going to be developing a revised plan. Certainly the issue of mental health and addictions is extremely important. It is the leading cause of disability more than all cancers combined. We know it is a pressing issue we need to address.'

Over the course of his election campaign, Mr. Ford routinely stressed the importance of listening to frontline workers in the healthcare system for suggestions, the identification of their own needs, and to identify 'efficiencies' that can be found within. Ms. Elliott, on the other hand, comes at this role expert in the views of patients.

But these varying perspectives, from patient from healthcare provider, are 'largely in alignment,' she says.

'I did a lot of work with patients in my previous role but I also dealt a lot with health care providers to hear their views. They want to serve patients, they want a better system of health care. That's what we all want and I think everyone needs to be a participant in that discussion to get a truly well-rounded view of what the system should look like. That's what I intend to do in my new role as

Minister of Health.

?One of the biggest [factors I weighed when accepting my cabinet appointment] was considering my responsibility to the constituents of Newmarket-Aurora. It is really important for me that I do my work locally and fulfil my responsibilities to the people who elected me. That is of primary importance to me. My concern is balancing my time locally with my provincial responsibilities.?

In the second part of our interview with Newmarket-Aurora's new MPP, Ms. Elliott focuses on her local priorities.