

Southlake Community Ontario Health Team gets green light from Province



Team will begin tackling senior care in 2020: Southlake

Southlake Regional Health Centre's ongoing efforts to provide more connected care for its patients in York Region and South Simcoe received a significant boost on Thursday as the Province formally approved the establishment of the Southlake Community Ontario Health Team.

Ontario Health Teams (OHTs) are at the centre of the Provincial Government's reforms to the Province's healthcare system, and these teams are tasked to work as one to "create a seamless local healthcare system" in the effort to eliminate "hallway healthcare."

The approval of the Southlake Community OHT, one of the first 24 teams to get the formal green light, was announced by Health Minister (and Newmarket-Aurora MPP) Christine Elliott, accompanied by Arden Krystal, President & CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre, at the York Region Paramedic Services Headquarters in East Gwillimbury.

"Today is a really significant day for health care in our Region," said Ms. Elliott. "It is a really significant day, I would say, for healthcare across Ontario. I know for many, especially patients left frustrated by a disconnected and fractured system, today has felt like a long time in coming."

"We all know our healthcare system is facing pressures and across Ontario patients and families are getting lost in the system. They are falling through the cracks, waiting too long to be able to access the care they need. That's why our government [has made] a commitment to Ontarians to build a sustainable and connected public healthcare system focused on the needs of patients and on ending hallway healthcare. To achieve our goal, our government is creating OHTs and these teams will better support patients and their families by connecting care providers to work as one single team. In doing so, OHTs will ensure a seamless experience for patients and smooth transitions through the systems."

In its first year, the Southlake Community OHT will focus on supporting older adults experiencing complex care needs, along with adults with mental health and addictions challenges, the Minister elaborated.

“These new services will dramatically improve the patient experience and make navigating the health care system easier and more convenient,” she said. “There are already great examples of community providers coming together to provide this patient-centred care like Southlake At Home, one of my favourite provider programs, which is a home and community care provider program that provides patients with an intensive transitional care plan to ensure their safe return from hospital.

“I can tell you this is going to be very popular. There are many other hospitals across the Province that are looking at the Southlake At Home model and this kind of innovation is exactly what we're looking for.”

In addition to representatives from Southlake Regional Health Centre, partners involved in the Southlake Community OHT include the Aurora-Newmarket Family Health Team, Bayshore HealthCare, the Canadian Mental Health Association (York & South Simcoe), CHATS (Community & Home Assistance to Seniors), Enhanced Care, Extensicare, Georgina Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinic, LOFT Community Services, SE Health, Southlake Academic Family Health Team, the Regional Municipality of York, and over 140 local family physicians.

“One of our objectives is to strengthen the supports that the community sector provides for the most complex patients we care for in order to help them stay safely and with dignity at home for as long as possible,” said Christina Bisanz, CEO of CHATS.

Added Rebecca Shields, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region & South Simcoe: “Collaboration can have a huge positive impact, especially when it comes to community mental health, addictions and supportive housing.”

This support was underscored at Thursday's announcement by Dr. David Makary, Primary Care Lead on the Southlake Community OHT.

“Over the past seven months, we have been engaging family physicians and nurse practitioners within our community,” he said, noting feedback ultimately centred on a few key themes. “First, the current siloed system leads to sub-optimal patient outcomes, something we all know very well. The primary care providers across our area are experiencing increasing burnout and finally arranging care for complex patients is difficult, complicated, and involves way too much paperwork. While I am happy to say that the Southlake Community OHT, we are committed to addressing these issues and implementing an OHT that provides both seamless care for patients and families, as well as simplifying processes for our providers.

For the OHT to be successful, system coordination needs to be rooted in primary care. At the Southlake Community OHT, we are building on insights from leading international health care systems in order to jump from the disparate silos to truly connected care. We're going to start with our frail, older population who have complex medical and social needs. As well as our adults with mental health needs and addictions. The best part is that we're designing a model that can expand to include other populations over time and, as we build, we're leading. We believe our model will help improve patient outcomes, enhance patient and provider satisfaction and improve the value and efficiency in our system.

Ms. Krystal agreed that breaking down silos and eliminating barriers will be the key to the OHT's success.

Long delays do not contribute to a great experience for these patients as it has a negative effect on them not only on them personally but on patients elsewhere in the hospital who are waiting in emergency, she said. And it has a negative impact for our staff who know that they should be doing something different for patients.

The delays have a ripple effect. Patients wait longer in the emergency department, sometimes surgeries can be delayed by patients of different services that are in all the different types of program areas. We're forced to care for patients in unconventional spaces such as gyms, lounges or even hallways. With Southlake At Home, it was born out of the belief that collaborating directly with home care providers and community support agencies we could dramatically reduce the wait for home care and keep people healthy at home. Today I am happy to say we have virtually eliminated the wait to get home for our complex patients via this program. Patient by patient, transition by transition, we are working together to bring connected care to our part of the province and every day we are seeing this model produce better outcomes for patients. Not only is it improving patient experience and staff satisfaction, but it is significantly less expensive than the traditional approach.

By Brock Weir