

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Hospital parking fees to be curbed

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In the spring of 2014, our government made a commitment to work with hospitals to cap or cut parking fees for those who most frequently visit the hospital.

We believe parking fees should not be a barrier to accessing health care.

When people have to visit the hospital because of a health issue, their foremost thought should be taking care of their health or the health of a loved one ? not how they're going to afford parking.

This is important because we know when patients are surrounded by loved ones, they get better faster. We want to ensure those loved ones are there to help them through their health care challenges.

We also know that seniors make up a large percentage of those frequent users of the hospital, and we understand the cost of parking can be an extra burden upon them.

We want to help alleviate that worry.

And so, our government is taking action.

We have talked with patients, hospitals and stakeholders to find a reasonable plan that makes sure patients, visitors and hospitals are well served.

On Monday, I was pleased to announce that starting October 1, frequent hospital users will be able to take advantage of parking discounts of 50 per cent at many Ontario hospitals, including the three hospitals in York Region.

Under our plan, hospitals that charge more than \$10 a day for parking must provide 5-, 10- and 30-day passes ? at 50 per cent off the daily rate.

These passes will also be: transferrable between patients and caregivers; have in-and-out privileges throughout a 24-hour period; and remain valid for one year from the date of purchase.

Not only will parking be less expensive, it will also be more flexible ? for patients, their families and friends.

Our government is also taking action to limit increases in parking fees. Frequent users can expect no rate increases for three years.

And going forward, any increases will be tied to the rate of inflation.

Under this plan, all hospitals that charge for parking will be required to implement parking policies that meet the province's guideline.

Hospitals will be required to work with patients and consult with their patient and family advisory councils to develop these policies to ensure that patients, their families and their visitors can access hospitals as safely, conveniently and economically as possible.

Last February, our government launched our Patients First: Action Plan for Health Care. Through that plan, we made a commitment to make it easier for people to access the services they need, when they need them. We committed to making our health care system more accountable and transparent to the people of Ontario. With this parking initiative, we have taken another step forward in meeting those commitments.

This announcement will make a difference for those who regularly visit our hospitals. Close to 900,000 patients and their visitors in Ontario will benefit from reduced parking fees, including about 135,000 seniors.

Patients and hospitals were consulted by the government last fall and support was almost universal. Of course, hospitals rightly have concerns about possible lost revenue. Early analysis by the Ministry of Health suggests some hospitals might increase revenue because lower rates may result in more users.

We're asking hospitals to continue to work with their Local Health Integration Network and the Ministry to identify financial pressures they may experience with the reduction in parking fees. We have consulted with hospitals and the Ontario Hospital Association and we know their priority, like ours, is doing what is best for patients and their loved ones. The Ministry will evaluate the new rules and its financial and performance impacts within one year of implementation and will continue to work with our hospitals.

Together with our hospitals and with patients, we are making parking more affordable so that patients and their families can focus on what's most important ? getting healthy and spending time with their loved ones.

It's provincial budget time ? have your say

The provincial budget affects everyone in the province, so we want to make sure everyone has a chance to share their ideas. In person and online consultations give you the chance to share your ideas with the government and tell us what you'd like to see in the 2016 budget.

The deficit is down, job numbers in Ontario are up, and we are expected to lead economic growth in Canada. Although the economy remains challenging, we are moving in the right direction.

If you have a budget idea, email the government at: submissions@ontario.ca, or visit the Ontario government's website for pre-budget submissions. Alternatively, please feel free to contact my office with your ideas.