

## Newmarket-Aurora candidates find agreement on healthcare measures



Without Progressive Conservative candidate Dawn Gallagher Murphy in attendance, last Thursday's Provincial debate for Newmarket-Aurora, candidates found a lot of common ground ? particularly on the issue of health care for Ontarians.

Held at the NewRoads Performing Arts Centre on Mulock Drive, participating candidates included Iwona Czarnecka of the New Blue party, Denis Heng of the NDP, Carolina Rodriguez of the Green Party and Dr. Sylvain Roy of the Ontario Liberals.

Participating candidates were immediately put in the hot seat with questions on how to improve Ontario's healthcare system, one which was tested to its limits during the height of the global pandemic.

Without Ms. Gallagher Murphy to speak on behalf of the PCs, candidates agreed that more needs to be done to protect the ?vulnerable? and ?crumbling? system.

?I think the pandemic has really shown the vulnerabilities within our healthcare system, but I think it is very important to note that these aren't new problems,? said Mr. Heng, kicking off the response. ?These are problems that started 20 years ago because of the lack of investment in our public services. What the NDP will do is we're going to be funding hospitals, we're going to be getting rid of hallway medicine that was started by the Liberals and?we're trying to fix the system that has been neglected and broken over the last 20 years.?

Mr. Heng said his party would introduce universal mental healthcare with the idea that mental healthcare is indeed healthcare and shouldn't have to be paid for ?with our credit cards.?

As a healthcare professional with an emphasis on mental health, Dr. Roy said he has seen the system ?fall apart and crumble? in front of him.

?The Conservative government is trying to build a house without a strong foundation,? he said. ?The Ontario Liberal Party is committed to building the PSW base salary by \$25 per hour and we will repeal Bill 124. We will work hard at clearing the surgical and diagnostic backlog and invest \$1 billion into that. We will invest \$2 billion into seniors care, \$3 billion in reducing mental health wait times and train new mental health workers, including social workers and psychologists and psychotherapists.

?One thing I am thoughtful about is the opioid crisis and the need to invest into prevention and treating opioid addiction and overdoses. More importantly, we [will] reinforce the backbone of healthcare and seniors care in Ontario by training, recruiting and retaining health care workers and we will fight hard the Conservatives' plan to privatize hospitals.?

Ms. Rodriguez agreed that the problems currently being faced by the healthcare system came well before the pandemic, but said the pandemic didn't make things any easier.

'We need to start investing in our healthcare system that was divested from so many years ago,' she said. 'We not only need to invest in the infrastructure we depend on to house our healthcare workers and those who need care, but the workers within. We need to repeal Bill 124 and ensure that people are paid fairly for the work that they do. We need to make sure we hire more nurses and doctors and people to actually take care of us when we're sick. We can't continue to divest from our critical healthcare system. Southlake, for example, needs more investment. It needs a new building in order to support the growing population of Newmarket and those surrounding, as well as our aging populations.'

Ms. Czarnecka agreed that the pandemic 'revealed' cracks that were already within the system but said a 'grassroots' approach was needed to find solutions, including speaking with frontline workers to determine fixes that are 'effective, efficient and affordable.'

'We also want to end the mandates and re-hire everyone wrongfully fired because of the mandates and get back to Base Zero before COVID by giving the professionals they need to clear the backlog,' she said. 'Our party recognizes healthcare as a primary responsibility of government. We need to identify mismanaged areas of government and allocate the funds to increase the overall healthcare budget.'

All four participating candidates agreed on the importance of making an increase of pay for nurses and PSWs permanent. Ms. Czarnecka, for instance, said it was integral to 'entice healthcare workers back into the system' through increasing salaries and wages. Mr. Heng agreed, but said 'we need to put our money where our mouth is' and repeal Bill 124 which capped salaries.

'We really need to have a discussion in this society to say, 'How much do we really value our healthcare workers?' because they are the lifeblood of hospitals and long-term care homes, not just the buildings. We need to have an honest discussion about this.'

Another important part of the discussion was the issue of tackling the growing backlog of needed procedures within the system, an issue tackled by Ms. Rodriguez and Dr. Roy.

For Ms. Rodriguez, this starts with investments in healthcare, particularly the people the system relies upon.

'We need more doctors to be able to perform them,' she said. 'We also need more spaces in our ORs and not only to perform the surgeries themselves but other services that have been neglected because of the surgery backlog. A lot of long-term care homes have been overflowing and a lot of older people had to stay in hospitals instead of long-term care homes, instead at home with personal support workers. With that, we need to invest in all areas of our healthcare system, not only the surgeries themselves but everything that surrounds them and affects the surgeries as well.'

Added Dr. Roy: 'The pandemic has highlighted that our workforce is strained. We need to invest heavily in our workforce because they are the ones who are the backbone of our system and that they are going to be the ones doing the procedures.'

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