

ONTARIO 2021

# Fall Economic Statement

Health Practice Summary & Analysis



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# Overview

On November 4, 2021, Ontario Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy tabled the Government of Ontario's Fall Economic Statement (FES), titled *Build Ontario*.

There was a new tone to the speech from the Finance Minister as the focus was not solely on COVID-19 for the first time in the past 19 months. Although the FES included investments in response to the impact COVID-19 has had on the health care system, there was also a focus on strengthening and rebuilding health care in Ontario – particularly the long-term care system (LTC) and supports for health human resources.

Overall health sector funding is anticipated to be \$69.9 billion in 2021-22, compared to the spring's budget projection of \$69.8 billion.

# Current Context

This statement comes just over six months before Ontarians head to the polls on June 2, 2022. Despite vaccination rates continuing to climb and the fourth wave of the pandemic seeming to be in check, COVID-19 has continued to consume most of the government's attention and has been the focus of the majority of recent investments.

The FES also comes as Ontario begins to ramp up plans for COVID-19 booster vaccines over the coming months as well as initial doses for children aged five to 11, once approved by Health Canada.

# Summary of Health Investments

## Health Human Resources

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### Nursing Workforce Expansion

Investment of \$342 million to strengthen the nursing workforce by adding and upskilling more than 5,000 nurses and 8,000 personal support workers (PSWs) by 2022-23. The province is also providing 500 registered nurses with specialized acute care training and expanding nursing enrollment at universities and colleges.

### Nurse Practitioners in LTC

Investment of \$57.6 million, beginning in 2022-23, for 225 nurse practitioners in the long-term care sector, as recommended by Ontario's Long-Term Care Commission. This also includes incentives to retain nurse practitioners.

## Home Care and Seniors

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### Investing in Home Care

Investment of \$548.5 million over three years in the home and community care sector. This funding is expected to support up to an estimated 28,000 post-acute surgical patients and up to an estimated 21,000 patients with complex health conditions every year.

### Seniors' Home Safety Tax Credit

The government is proposing to extend the Seniors' Home Safety Tax Credit, originally part of the 2020 Budget, into 2022. This credit supports home renovations to improve safety and accessibility for seniors.

## Mental Health and Addictions

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### Health Care Worker Mental Health and Addiction Supports

Investment of \$12.4 million over two years, starting in 2021-22, to continue access to existing and expanded mental health and addiction supports. These treatment options include one-to-one psychotherapy and workshops provided by partners. This funding will also support needs assessments, online peer support, workplace mental health training and intervention services at select hospitals to help frontline workers.

### Mental Health Supports for Postsecondary Students

Investment of an additional \$8.7 million in 2021-22 to increase mental health supports at postsecondary institutions.

### Eating Disorder Services

Investment of an additional \$8.1 million in 2021-22 to address demand for eating disorder services for children and youth.

## Long-Term Care / Retirement Homes

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### Increasing Enforcement

Investment of \$72.3 million over three years to increase enforcement capacity including hiring 156 additional inspectors by 2022-23 – doubling the number of inspectors across the province.

### Capacity Increase

Planning to invest additional \$3.7 billion, beginning in 2024-25, to build an additional 10,000 new LTC beds and upgrade 12,000 existing beds to modern standards.

### Support for Retirement Homes and Congregate Settings

Investing an additional \$11 million in 2021-22 including \$8 million for retirement home staffing and \$3 million for on-site and mobile support teams to help contain any COVID-19 outbreaks. There is an additional \$8.9 million investment for COVID-19 supports in congregate care settings, including homes for children or adults with developmental disabilities.

## Other Investments

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### Acute Care and LTC Integration

Investment of \$22 million over three years to enable integration of information between hospitals and LTC homes through a made-in-Ontario software solution.

### Seniors' Dental

Investment of \$17 million over the next two years, starting in 2022-23, to increase access to dental services for eligible seniors.

### Recommitment to Hospital Infrastructure

The government reconfirmed its commitment to an investment of \$30.2 billion in hospital infrastructure over the next 10 years including projects at Trillium Health Partners, William Osler Health System, London Health Sciences Centre, Oak Valley Health – Uxbridge Hospital, Windsor-Essex, Windsor Hôtel-Dieu Grace Healthcare and the Weeneebayko Area Health Authority.

# Analysis

With an election looming, the Ford government's FES deliberately earmarks significant investments in areas that have been exposed as gaps throughout the pandemic and have sparked widespread criticism. The spending plan includes more than a half billion dollars to expand home care services, with a goal of easing capacity pressure on hospital acute care beds and keeping Ontarians out of long-term care. It also sets ambitious health human resource targets to help address the staffing crisis within the health system and provides support for the mental health sector to combat rapidly rising numbers of Ontarians experiencing mental health issues – a problem commonly referred to as the parallel pandemic.

Noticeably absent from the government's FES is any mention of the healthcare transformation that had been a key component of the PC's health platform prior to the pandemic.

Opposition parties were quick to respond that the statement fell short. Andrea Horwath and the NDP focused on the absence of a permanent PSW wage increase despite the recent commitment from Premier Ford. The Liberals meanwhile focussed on the vaccine mandate debate claiming that the Ford government has sided with protesters outside of hospitals rather than health care heroes.

## What's Next

Despite the election still being over six months away, there is little doubt that the unofficial campaign has already begun.

Anticipating that the NDP and Liberals will not vote in favour of the FES, we can expect the Ford government to emphasize this government's significant investments in health system operations and particularly previous investments in health capital. They will continue to underscore that these investments are not supported by the opposition parties.

The upcoming spring budget will, like the FES, most certainly feature investments that are politically advantageous to the Ford government. This could include spending in specific geographic regions or in certain areas, such as mental health and addictions, seniors' care or addressing surgical backlogs, that are

likely to garner more votes come election day.

With the federal election now a distant memory and the Liberals once again in power with a minority government, long-awaited Canada Health Transfer (CHT) discussions are set to begin. The Ford government has long claimed that the CHT covers only 22 per cent of Ontario's health expenditures and, along with all provincial and territorial governments, is demanding that the federal government increase their share to 35 percent.

Finally, while the Ford government will continue to devote significant attention and resources to ending the pandemic, we can expect an attempt to change the public narrative to post-pandemic recovery in Ontario, with the hopes of finally saying goodbye to COVID-19.

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