
MEMORANDUM

CHR 1-2025

Subject: Physician Recruitment Roundtable Summary

Date: March 20, 2025

To: Regional Council

From: Jim Bradley, Regional Chair

On November 26, 2024, Niagara Region hosted Niagara's first-ever Physician Recruitment Roundtable to formulate coordinated strategies that will attract and retain family doctors within Niagara.

Specific objectives for the event were to adopt a shared understanding of the challenges facing all Niagara municipalities, share and learn from best practices within and beyond Niagara, and pursue a more coordinated approach to Niagara's physician recruitment activities.

This memorandum provides an overview of the roundtable and a summary of the themes and key findings that emerged. A fulsome report from the independent consultant, Redbrick Communications, is also attached.

Background

Like many other municipalities across Ontario, Niagara is experiencing a significant shortage of family doctors, exacerbated by the rate at which Niagara's population continues to grow. In fact, currently family physicians are only able to serve about 65 per cent of Niagara's population. Beyond the obvious effects on the health and wellness of residents, physician shortages also have a downstream effect on EMS offload delays, mental health programs, homelessness supports and other social programs, which directly affect the Region's budget and property taxes.

In order to address this shortage, Niagara Region employs a Physician Recruitment and Retention Specialist, who leads a coordinated strategy in concert with the area municipalities to attract doctors to all of Niagara. This resource has been with the

Region since 2019. The area municipalities have also adopted a variety of approaches to attract new primary care physicians to their specific communities. These range from outreach and marketing programs to financial incentives. These combined efforts, especially those of the Physician Recruitment and Retention Specialist, have been highly successful over the past several years, and in 2024 Niagara attracted a record 26 new family physicians to the region.

Despite these successes however, as the effects of the shortage become more pronounced, there has been a universal recognition that Niagara must take a more coordinated and collaborative approach to physician recruitment.

To kickstart this collaboration, Niagara Region hosted Niagara's first-ever Physician Recruitment Roundtable on November 26, 2024 with the support of an independent consultant, Redbrick Communications. A total of 38 representatives from Niagara's area municipalities, post-secondary institutions, health care system, and individual family doctors attended.

Agenda and Proceedings

The day began with a presentation from Niagara's Physician Recruitment and Retention Specialist Jill Croteau and a keynote address from local family and emergency physician Dr. Jeffrey S. Remington who shared local updates on physician recruitment targets and explored industry best practices for physician recruitment in use in other jurisdictions.

Participants were then placed into facilitated conversation groups where they discussed three main topics: (a) the realities of building a practice, (b) incentives, and (c) advocacy to other levels of government. Participants also provided feedback on the importance of physician recruitment for their community, why physicians should choose Niagara, and any ideas they had to move this work forward. Results from each breakaway table were then shared with the whole group.

Facilitators guided these discussions and collected fulsome notes, which Redbrick Communications then analyzed in order to generate a series of key findings and short, medium, and long-term recommendations for next steps.

Key takeaways

Through the discussions, a number of themes emerged that will help inform Niagara's future approach to physician recruitment. Below is a broad overview of the themes that were heard. More details are available in Appendix 1.

Physicians as business owners

Participants recognized the critical fact that physicians are not only medical practitioners, but also entrepreneurs and members of the business community. The challenges they face must be seen in that light. It was recognized that Niagara needs to make it easier for family doctors to set up and run a business and must provide more coordinated support to understand and navigate that process.

Need for increased collaboration

Participants identified several benefits to better collaboration between municipalities, beyond improved communication and information-sharing. For example, a coordinated approach that looks beyond municipal boundaries when helping physicians find an ideal and suitable office space will meet the needs of the physician while serving the needs of the surrounding community. Likewise, determining when consideration should be given to ensuring a consistent, Niagara-wide approach to offering financial and other incentives.

Considering physicians as family members, spouses and as a professional

Another key takeaway from the roundtable was considering the personal lives and considerations of physicians relocating to Niagara. Table groups discussed ways to provide wraparound services that served the broader quality-of-life needs not only for physicians, but also for their spouses and families. Participants also recognized the reality that physicians can and do live in different communities from their practice, highlighting the importance of municipalities working together to promote the lifestyle benefits of the entire Niagara community.

Limited capacity in the Region's specialist position

There was widespread support for the work and progress being made by the Region's physician recruitment and retention specialist, who has been instrumental in much of Niagara's collective success in bringing family doctors to the region. However, participants recognized that the capacity of that one individual is already stretched. To meet growing demand, more resources will be needed to ensure the recommendations formulated by the roundtable are properly resourced and able to be completed.

Expanding partnerships

Finally, participants recognized a need to engage a broader set of partners and organizations across Niagara to aid in our collective effort to attract and retain family doctors, especially given the recognition that physicians must also be considered as business owners and as community members. This could include closer collaboration with organizations like financial institutions, accountants, law firms, patients, nurses and administrative staff.

Recommendations

Following a comprehensive analysis of the roundtable, Redbrick Communications and Regional staff have created a list of action items that were proposed and explored through the roundtable discussions. In addition to short-term actions, including new marketing materials, quarterly collaboration calls with all partners, and toolkits to help physicians set up practice, longer-term strategies to increase Niagara-wide coordination were proposed. Key initiatives could include:

- A unified Physician Recruitment Strategy, delivering a coordinated, region-wide vision for physician recruitment, engaging local mayors, CAOs, and healthcare leaders.
- Increasing the capacity of the Region's Physician Recruitment and Retention office by hiring additional staff to support a growing workload.
- Exploring a coordinated Niagara-wide incentive strategy that goes beyond financial incentives to also include partnerships with developers for office space and housing options for physicians.
- Coordinating advocacy efforts across municipalities, aiming for systemic changes to improve compensation models and reduce administrative burdens on physicians.

A full list of proposed action items is available in Appendix 1.

Next Steps

Following this report, the Region will share the consultant's report and its findings with all roundtable participants. Economic Development staff will further analyze the full report and will develop a fulsome workplan to explore and advance the action items identified in the report, in collaboration with local economic development staff and other key partners. This workplan, with proposed action items, will be brought for Council's consideration and input through the Region's Planning and Economic Development Committee.

Staff will also work with the Regional Chair's Office to explore opportunities for further Council engagement and discussion on the wider healthcare situation in Niagara and Ontario, as requested at the March 5, 2025 Planning and Economic Development Committee meeting.

Respectfully submitted and signed by:

Jim Bradley, Chair
Niagara Region