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Province Says We Are Running Out Of Room For COVID Patients In Hospitals But Where Have All The Beds Gone?

By **Pamela Vanmeer** - December 21, 2020   💬 0

Photo by Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

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KAWARTHA LAKES-The Ontario government announced a sweeping lockdown in much of Ontario today. During a press conference officials said they were forced to make the move to keep enough beds open in hospitals to care for COVID patients.

"We must protect our hospitals from being overwhelmed at all costs in the next couple of weeks." Premier Ford said.

In the press conference Premier Doug Ford, Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education, Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health, and Dr. Naveed Mohammad, President and CEO, William Osler Health System announced a province wide shutdown beginning on December 26th.

"This was not an easy decision before the holidays, but we have reached a tipping point," said Minister Elliott. "We continue to see sharp increases in hospitalizations and occupancy in intensive care units is reaching concerning levels. Urgent action must be taken to prevent our health care system from becoming overwhelmed. By implementing a Provincewide Shutdown, we can work to stop the virus in its tracks, safeguard hospital capacity, and save lives."

According to the Financial Accountability Office (FAO) of Ontario the province had 910 hospital beds available before the pandemic hit in March. A report released in April by FAO said there were 22,358 hospital beds in Ontario with 21,425 already being taken. That left 910 available for COVID patients before the pandemic according to the FAO.

On April 16th the Ontario government announced it has added 1,035 acute care beds and 1,492 critical care beds and had taken steps to ensure hospitals have the staff available to care for a sudden surge in patients.

"Thanks to the hard work and relentless preparation of our hospital staff to build capacity in our hospitals, we are in a position to better allocate resources to sectors that are in critical need and respond to any potential surge in cases," said Premier Doug Ford at the time. "When you combine these life-saving beds with the very best care delivered by our highly skilled hospital staff, our patients will definitely have a fighting chance against this deadly virus."

In another announcement in October the Ontario government said it would be providing $116.5 million to create up to 766 more beds at 32 hospitals and alternate health facilities across the province. Officials said this investment will help reduce surgical backlogs and improve access to care during COVID-19. The funding is in addition to the $2.8 billion the province is providing in the government's COVID-19 fall preparedness plan according to officials.

"Our government made a commitment to end hallway health care, cut hospital wait times, and build a better, more connected health care system that puts patients and their families first," said Premier Ford in October. "We are taking another step today to keep that promise by adding hundreds more hospital beds across the province. This will not only ensure we are ready for any surges in COVID-19 cases, but provide patients with the care they need and deserve close to home."

So that means a total of 4,203 additional hospital beds since the pandemic. As of today there is 910 people in hospital in Ontario with COVID and supposedly 4,203 beds available. So where did all of these beds go?

We asked Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health that question earlier today.

"I think that beds are obviously very important but they are of no use without human resources, the staffing that is often very technical and needs to be trained." Yaffe said. "Those beds are being implemented as well as looking at the staffing."

When we asked Jaffe what the province has done over the last ten months to deal with staff shortages. She could not answer that question.

"There's a lot of work happening around that but you know you can't just produce trained nurses out of thin air"

But in fact she may be able to do just that. Some hospitals in Ontario are laying off nursing staff in the middle of the pandemic. Southlake Regional Health Centre laid off 97 Registered Nurses in September resulting in the loss of 176,000 hours of direct patient care according to the Ontario Nurses Association.

"I cannot fathom how Southlake Regional Health Centre CEO Arden Krystal can justify cutting front-line registered nurses during a global pandemic," noted ONA President Vicki McKenna, RN in September. "With the second wave of COVID-19 and the upcoming influenza season, which will put undue pressure on all hospitals, cutting registered nurses is completely irresponsible."

The cuts are widespread and occurring at many busy acute care units in which patient acuity is very high. "These cuts will devastate the Newmarket community," adds McKenna. "I would like to know what the Deputy Premier and Minister of Health Christine Elliott thinks about these disastrous front-line RN cuts as they are happening right within her riding of Newmarket-Aurora."

In Oshawa we are told an unknown number of nurses have been laid-off and we are hearing of a similar situation in Barrie, according to sources.

Why is staff being laid-off if we don't have enough staff to deal with the pandemic? And where did the new beds go? That's not clear.
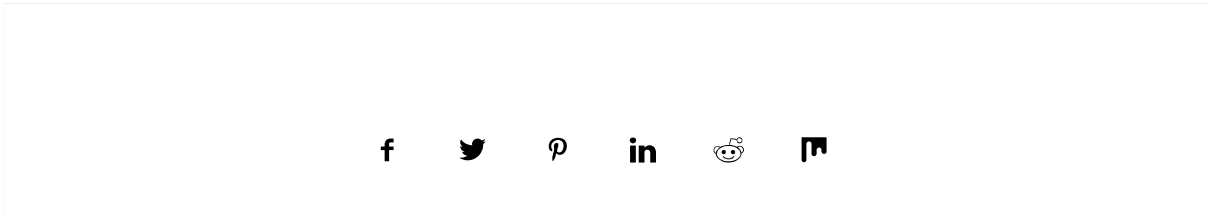
Here are the links to the number quoted in this article:

https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/56688/ontario-significantly-expands-hospital-capacity-to-prepare-for-any-covid-19-outbreak-scenario
https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/58955/ontario-adding-over-760-hospital-beds-across-the-province
https://www.fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/health-2020

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Pamela Vanmeer

Pamela VanMeer is a two time winner of the prestigious Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) Award. Her investigative reports on abuse in Long Term Care Homes garnered international attention for the issue and won the Ron Laidlaw Award. She is a former reporter and anchor at CHEX News, now Global Peterborough and helped launch the New CHEX Daily, a daily half hour talk show. While at CHCH News in Hamilton she covered some of the biggest news stories of the day.

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