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HEALTH: Lack of provincial funding leads to serious budget shortfalls

York Region hospitals struggle to keep pace with growing demands

BY PATRICK CASEY
 Staff Writer

York Region's three hospitals have received a little more than \$3 million in new growth funding from the province, but the additional money has done little to address serious shortfalls in their overall operating budgets.

On Monday, the Ministry of Health directed \$20 million to help hospitals in high-growth regions handle increased workloads created by population

surges.

The figure represented part of the provincial government's commitment of \$20.6 billion for health care costs — including an extra \$692 million for hospitals, thanks to a \$1.6-billion increase in expenditures this year alone.

York Central Hospital in Richmond Hill received \$1.3 million, while Newmarket's York County Hospital was granted \$1 million. Markham Stouffville Hospital was allotted \$744,852, about \$855,000 less than a year ago and still

\$4.5 million short of its \$60-million budget.

York Central president Frank Lissing said the hospital received less than half the total amount requested, leaving the hospital \$9.5 million short of its \$78.9-million overall budget.

"It's one small step forward but we are certainly looking for more," said Lissing yesterday morning, noting the hospital is currently registering a 6.5 per cent increase in caseloads compared to a five-per-cent growth in population.

I liken it to the greyhound dogs at the race track who run faster and faster, but never catch the rabbit ahead of them.

"We are required to handle much more sophisticated workups and innovations, but that's not reflected in the money from the ministry."

"We are winning a little, but still lagging behind. I liken it to the greyhound dogs at the race track who run faster and faster, but never catch the rabbit ahead of them."

New Markham Stouffville Hospital president Dr. Jim MacLean said he was disappointed its funding was not the same as past years.

"The fund has been diluted this year because (the ministry) opened it up with more hospitals being eligible," he said. "Obviously, everything helps, but it is still not enough to meet the demands of our communities across York Region."

"We need these funds to provide the quality service our staff provides and we will have to make a very strong case to the ministry. After that, we will see if they come through for us."

York County president Dan Carriere said the \$1 million cheque is the lowest amount the hospital has received since growth funding was introduced four years ago and leaves a \$4-million deficit on its \$70-million budget.

"We received \$2 million last year and we have always been the largest recipient of growth dollars in the past," Carriere said.

"Every bit helps and we are certainly gratified that we got some, but we are waiting to see how the numbers were calculated."

Eleven hospitals across greater Toronto received a total of \$13.5 million in growth funding, a needed infusion with population exceeding the provincial average.

Despite the worries from regional hospital officials, GTA/905 Healthcare Alliance executive director Jim Armstrong said the money couldn't have arrived at a better time for hospitals in the regions of York, Durham Halton and Peel.

"The 905 hospitals are forecasting an operating shortfall of \$65 million. This will have a major impact on access to hospital services for the 2.5 million residents who live in the four regions," said Armstrong, whose organization has been working with the ministry to develop a population needs-based funding formula that permanently recognizes growth.

But, although alliance chairperson Sandra Farley said she is awaiting additional financial announcements from the ministry that could help 905 hospitals catch up to other areas of the province, Lissing doesn't expect that to happen anytime soon.

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