



News Release

For Immediate Release

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Hospitals Struggle with Doctor and Nurse Shortages and Lack a Provincial Strategy to Avoid Emergency Room Closures

(TORONTO) Emergency departments struggle to stay open while coping with increasing staff shortages of both doctors and nurses, Acting Auditor General Nick Stavropoulos said today.

“The lack of a province-wide strategy to help hospitals prevent emergency department closures, in addition to ongoing staffing shortages, continues to put a strain on hospitals,” said Stavropoulos. “This means that patients are less likely to receive timely care when they need it.”

We found that while patients requiring immediate life-saving care are able to access it in a timely manner, emergency department wait times remain long, with patients waiting on average two hours to be assessed by a physician, up 30 minutes in the last 10 years. Patients who require an inpatient bed have to wait more than 24 hours, and many continue to be treated in emergency department hallways when space is not available.

The audit also found that a lack of nursing staff to quickly triage patients who are brought into emergency departments via ambulance delays paramedics from returning to communities to respond to other emergency calls. While some paramedics and hospitals have worked together to improve turnaround times, not all hospitals have consistently adopted these best practices.

Patients who do not require emergency care, but lack timely access to primary care, also contribute to long wait times. We noted that one in five emergency visits involved patients who went to emergency for non-urgent issues because they did not have access to a family doctor or other services.

We found there were over 200 unplanned emergency department closures involving 23 hospitals, mostly in rural or remote areas, between July 2022 and June 2023, largely due to nursing and doctor shortages. If it wasn't for a Ministry of Health program that provides doctors to fill these gaps on an interim basis, there could have been an estimated 400 additional closures during the 2022/23 fiscal year.

To address these shortages, hospitals also rely on nurses from agencies at significantly higher hourly rates than permanent nurses. In 2022/23, one hospital spent about \$8 million on agency nurses in the emergency department, more than triple the \$2.4 million spent in 2021/22.

“The Province should work with hospitals to address challenges in Ontario's emergency departments and develop new ways to improve access to timely care,” said Stavropoulos.

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Office of the Auditor General of Ontario
Bureau du vérificateur général de l'Ontario

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