



The Niagara Ontario Health Team-Équipe Santé Ontario Niagara (NOHT-ÉSON) is a steadily growing network of more than 45 health care providers, social service agencies, educational institutions and patient/client and family/caregiver representatives. We are committed to working as one coordinated team to provide exceptional service, support and care to you, no matter when or where you need it, now and for our future generations.



### PATIENT LIKENS PRIMARY CARE ACCESS TO WINNING THE LOTTERY

Work is well underway to connect thousands of people in the Niagara region, who currently lack regular access to primary care services, with the right health care providers.

**Developed with help from many of the NOHT-ÉSON's partners, the Primary Care Initiative focuses on areas in Niagara where many people do not have a regular doctor or nurse practitioner. The strategy also includes other services like mental health and addiction support.**

In February 2024, the NOHT-ÉSON received \$2.1 million to help start this plan. **Bridges Community Health Centre** is leading the effort, along with **Centre de santé communautaire Hamilton/Niagara, Niagara Falls Community Health Centre, Niagara Medical Group Family Health Team, Niagara North Family Health Team, Quest Community Health Centre, REACH Niagara, and the Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region.**

"The primary care partners of the NOHT-ÉSON came together and developed a plan that meets the needs of different groups across the region," said **Taralea McLean**, Executive Director of Bridges Community Health Centre. She believes Ontario Health West liked how their proposal included how the resources were going to be shared by partners throughout the region.

Since the funding was announced, the group has hired seven nurse practitioners and five allied health professionals. They hope to connect between 5,800 and 7,200 people to team-based care or other services, like diabetes management.

"We've been able to recruit a good number of health care professionals for our teams," said McLean. She added that the providers have been busy onboarding new employees and expect to recruit more patients over the summer and fall.



"The idea is to connect people without a primary care provider to regular care and support those who don't have access to team-based care."

Bridges Community Health Centre received funding for three nurse practitioners, two social workers, and a physiotherapist. McLean hopes the added funding and services will help relieve the pressure on other organizations in Niagara that provide counseling for conditions like depression and anxiety, allowing patients to receive care in their own community.

As part of the initiative, mobile geriatric cognitive assessments are also being conducted across the region by the Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region. The partners plan to host PAP test and vaccine clinics for people who might not otherwise have access to this level of health care.

McLean says newly connected people are thrilled and grateful for the opportunity to be part of an inter-professional primary care team. She noted that many people are moving to South Niagara from the Greater Toronto Area, to places like Crystal Beach, Ridgeway, and Port Colborne.

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### NEW MOBILE COGNITIVE ASSESSMENT SERVICE IN NIAGARA

The **NOHT-ÉSON** is proud to announce that the **Mobile Cognitive Assessor program is now up and running**. This new service, the first of its kind in the area and made possible with funding from the Primary Care Initiative, is accepting referrals across the 12 municipalities of the Niagara region. **It aims to reduce wait times for cognitive assessments, making it easier and faster for people to get the care they need.**

The Mobile Cognitive Assessor program is a joint effort between the **Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region (ASNR)** and **Niagara Medical Group Family Health Team**, supported by the NOHT-ÉSON and funded by the **Ministry of Health**. The program helps take the load off specialized geriatric services by handling less complex cases, allowing geriatricians to focus people with challenging requirements.

"We are thrilled to offer this essential service to the Niagara community," stated **Teena Kindt**, Chief Executive Officer of the Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region.

"Our goal is to improve access to cognitive assessments and reduce the lengthy wait times that have been a



significant barrier for many individuals in our region to receive a diagnosis."

There are currently five primary care memory clinics in the region. Thanks to the efforts of the NOHT-ÉSON's Dementia Care Working Group, all families in Niagara can access memory clinic services. In addition, the **Portage Medical Family Health Team** and Niagara Medical Group Family Health Team now offer memory clinic services to patients who are not members of their family health teams through a referral from the person's family doctor.

"The Mobile Cognitive Assessor is a big step forward for cognitive care in our region," said **Frank Ruberto**, Executive Director of the Niagara Medical Group. "By making it easier to get comprehensive assessments, we are helping patients get the care they need more quickly and effectively."

The Mobile Cognitive Assessor visits patients in their homes, which means they don't have to travel and can be assessed in a comfortable and familiar setting. This approach reduces patient anxiety and gives a more accurate picture of their cognitive abilities. It is especially helpful for homebound patients who find it hard to visit traditional health care settings.

This new service means more people can get cognitive assessments, and it helps reduce the long wait times for specialized geriatric assessments, which can take more than eight months.

A family doctor can refer eligible patients by completing a referral form available on the Niagara Medical Group Family Health Team's website - <https://www.niagaramedicalgroup.com>.



### WORKING GROUP AIMS TO IMPROVE HEALTH HUMAN RESOURCES IN NIAGARA

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many areas throughout Canada have been facing shortages of health workers, and the Niagara region is no different. The lack of health professionals makes it hard for health organizations to provide timely and high-quality care. Sometimes, they even have to cut back or remove services.

One big problem in Niagara is the lack of information about where and how severe these shortages are. To tackle this, the **NOHT-ÉSON** started the Health Human Resources Working Group (HHRWG) earlier this year. **This group aims to understand the local situation better and find solutions specific to Niagara.**

The HHRWG has two main goals. First, they want to make sure everyone in Niagara has access to primary health care when they need it. Second, they aim to build a strong, healthy, and diverse workforce to meet the needs of the residents. These goals are part of the NOHT-ÉSON's new strategic plan.

The NOHT-ÉSON also wants to increase the number of health practitioners and team-based primary care providers. Another objective is to connect more equity-deserving people to primary care. In addition, the HHRWG is looking to improve recruitment and retention rates in Niagara and develop strategies to enhance provider satisfaction.

Members of the NOHT-ÉSON's Planning Table were invited to join the HHRWG. The group also sought representatives from outside the NOHT-ÉSON membership, including municipal and regional officials.

The HHRWG is co-led by **Jill Croteau**, a Physician Recruitment Specialist with the Niagara Region, and **Dr. Jeff Remington**, a Founding Physician at Niagara South Family Medicine. The first meeting of the HHRWG was in

March 2024, and they have already started their work.

The group created a survey in collaboration with the **Workforce Collective**, a Niagara non-profit that addresses workforce challenges. This survey was launched in mid-June and sent to NOHT-ÉSON partners. Its purpose includes identifying hard-to-fill roles, vacancy rates, and the human resource strategies used by different organizations.

"With this information, we can shape local solutions," said **Sabrina Piluso**, Executive Director of the NOHT-ÉSON. "You might expect this data to be collected and available already, but it's not."

After analyzing the survey results over the summer, the HHRWG will set their priorities and make a work plan. The results will be analyzed by a research assistant from Brock University, under the supervision of **Dr. Kathryn Halverson**, an Assistant Professor from the Department of Nursing in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences. In the meantime, the HHRWG is meeting with different organizations to understand their perspectives. They have already met with groups that work with internationally trained health professionals and are discussing a marketing strategy to highlight the learning, employment, and recreational opportunities that exist in Niagara.







### DEMENTIA COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE COMING TO NIAGARA

Family doctors in Niagara will soon be equipped with more resources and knowledge to better support their patients experiencing cognitive changes, such as those caused by dementia.

The Niagara Family Physician Dementia Community of Practice (CoP) is a new initiative where doctors can learn from each other and improve care for people living with dementia. The program will help doctors in Niagara become better at recognizing dementia and know what resources and referrals are available locally.

Over the past few years, the **NOHT-ÉSON's Dementia Care Working Group (DCWG)** has focused on improving dementia education and training for health care providers, while also exploring other opportunities to decrease wait times for specialized geriatric services.

The working group created a funding proposal to support the CoP, and the **Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region** submitted it to the **Niagara Community Foundation (NCF)** for consideration. In May 2024, the NCF granted over \$41,000 to support the initiative.

"We are thrilled that (this opportunity) has materialized," said **Teena Kindt**, Chief Executive Officer of the Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region and Co-Lead of the DCWG.

"The Community of Practice will enable family physicians to refer their patients to the care that is the most appropriate to the person's needs, and gain greater overall knowledge around dementia."

A significant part of the funding is being used for a lead physician to coordinate the CoP's activities. **Dr. Ehab Wassif** was hired to oversee the initiative. Dr. Wassif, a Family Physician with the Niagara Medical Group Family Health Team, is also the Lead Physician for the team's memory clinic.

The Dementia Care Working Group hosted focus groups with people living with dementia, their advocates, and doctors in the winter of 2023. They found that doctors often didn't have enough time during visits to perform cognitive assessments and many lacked the knowledge to use the available diagnostic tools. As a result, patients were being referred to the geriatric assessment program at **Niagara Health**, which had long wait times. The wait time has since been reduced from over 400 days to eight months, partly due to better collaboration and more appropriate referrals.

"We were hearing that patients weren't getting the support or answers to their cognitive concerns from their physicians," stated Kindt, who added that a workshop for family practitioners was also held to discuss their challenges and barriers for providing cognitive assessments. . It was determined that a community of practice focused on dementia was needed.

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# CONNECTED CARE

SUMMER 2024

Under the approved proposal, Dr. Wassif will dedicate half a day each week to the project. The community will include at least 10 doctors with expertise in dementia, a researcher/advisor, and clerical support. With Dr. Wassif hired, work is underway to recruit physicians over the summer to become members of the CoP.

**Dr. Larry Chambers**, Director, Research and Scholarship at the **Niagara Regional Campus for McMaster University's School of Medicine**, is the Project Advisor.

The Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region is providing administrative support with grant funds and in-kind office space and leadership to the initiative.

Kindt also shared that many of the physicians who were involved in the dementia care workshop in March of 2023 have already agreed to be involved with the CoP. The DCWG will oversee the work of the community of practice.

"This is an innovative solution to bridge the critical knowledge gap," concluded Kindt.

"We needed to reduce the time that it was taking for people to receive a diagnosis of dementia in order for them to receive timely, appropriate care."

In addition to increasing family doctors' overall knowledge of dementia and available resources, the DCWG hopes their efforts will lead to better outcomes for people living with dementia and their families. Other long-term goals include improving dementia care within family practices, advocating for policy changes and more resources for dementia care, and securing permanent funding for the community of practice to continue their work once the grant funding is complete.





### HOW PATIENTS AND CAREGIVERS HELP IMPROVE HEALTH CARE IN NIAGARA

The NOHT-ÉSON knows how important patients, families, and caregivers are in improving health and social services in Niagara. **People who have experienced the health care system firsthand, play a key role in decision-making at the NOHT-ÉSON.**

Currently, six representatives of the Patient/Client and Family/Caregivers Advisory Council (commonly known as PFAC) help guide the network's decisions. They participate on the Planning Table, the main decision-making body, various working groups, and PFAC.

Below, you will find the profile of PFAC representative **Ruth Stranges**.



Ruth is a lifelong resident and champion of the Niagara region. She is passionate about advocating for older adults in our health system, especially those whose first language is not English or French. Throughout her personal and professional life, she has had a passion for the Niagara region, advocating for all the great things it brings to residents. After her retirement as a business leader in the insurance sector, Ruth wanted

to give back and contribute to the continuous improvement of health care in Niagara. As a family representative, she looks forward to continuing to add value to that very cause.

The NOHT-ÉSON appreciates the dedication and efforts of our PFAC representatives, and the network is continuously developing opportunities for patients, clients, families, and caregivers to engage and contribute to its initiatives.

Are you an advocate for enhanced health care and social services in Niagara? Are you interested in getting involved? Click [here](#) to visit the engagement section of the NOHT-ÉSON's website or contact **Meredith Maxwell**, Project Manager for Population Health, at [pm@noht-eson.ca](mailto:pm@noht-eson.ca).

### *Patient Likens Primary Care Access to Winning the Lottery, continued from page 1.*

Bridges' health promoters have been providing intake orientation sessions for new clients at their Port Colborne and Fort Erie locations. McLean recently attended an orientation and overheard one person saying they felt like they had won the lottery by joining Bridges Community Health Centre. This person, originally from Port Colborne, had returned to the city two years ago and was reliant on walk-in clinics or the Urgent Care Centre for primary care.

Another person, who had been waiting to become a client of Bridges Community Health Centre, was looking forward to accessing the allied health services offered by the organization. Before hiring the new nurse practitioners, Bridges Community Health Centre was at capacity.

"People are grateful, especially those who haven't had a health care provider in a long time," McLean added. She emphasized that the group is determined to prove the success of the primary care initiative so that team-based care can be expanded to help more people.

"It makes a big difference when people have access to team-based care. Hopefully, we'll exceed our targets and show that this initiative is a good use of provincial funds, so they'll continue to support more health care professionals."