



PORT COLBORNE

• MAYOR'S OFFICE •

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August 15, 2025

To: Dr. Jane Philpott, Ontario's Primary Care Action Team
Cc: The Honourable Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
College Park – 5th Floor
777 Bay Street
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

RE: Request for Consultation on Healthcare in Port Colborne

Dear Dr. Philpott,

My name is William Steele, and I am the Mayor for the City of Port Colborne. Healthcare is the number one issue in our city, and our team has requested a meeting with the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Health over the weekend at AMO. While we realize we will be meeting with Mr. Anthony Leardi, we are requesting a meeting with you personally at a future date on this very important topic. I hope this letter can help open that door.

Earlier this year, we sent two formal letters to both your office and the Premier's Office advocating for the reinstatement of our Urgent Care Centre (UCC). Those letters captured the facts, but I want to go beyond that here. As a small, lower-tier municipality in Niagara, we have lived through a long, painful downsizing of healthcare services. We once had a full-service hospital. That was reduced to a 24/7 UCC. Today, we have a UCC with limited hours that is now closing completely on certain days this summer due to a physician shortage at Niagara Health.

It's not just about a service gap; there's a growing sense among our residents that they've been left behind. The data supports that feeling. Port Colborne has a higher proportion of vulnerable and priority populations when you look at socio-economic indicators. And yet, our access to care in comparison to other municipalities in Niagara continues to shrink.

We're told the answer is to increase access to primary care. We don't disagree, and we've been working hard to make that happen through our efforts on physician recruitment. But we are now facing the planned closure of our UCC in 2028, with no replacement model in place. As a municipality, we have no direct control over primary care or healthcare funding in general, yet we find ourselves losing this safety net, and our residents are looking to us for answers. This is why I believe your leadership and your vision for primary care could be critical in shaping the future of healthcare for our residents. We need your help.

With your plan potentially coming forward in September, I feel it is crucial to articulate our case. We ask you to consider whether funding models for UCCs could be adapted into your primary care vision to support communities like ours, with socio-economic factors that include:

- Education levels well below the provincial average.
- Household incomes well below the provincial average.
- The proportion of residents aged 65 and older is significantly higher than the provincial average.
- One in eight residents relies on the local food bank.

In addition to these factors, we have no direct public transportation to the closest emergency room located in a neighbouring city, and our population doubles during the spring and summer months due to seasonal visitors.

While we understand that closing two UCCs in South Niagara might help Niagara Health streamline their operations and prepare for the opening of their new hospital in two years, the cost of those efficiencies will be borne by our own residents, people who already have to travel further and wait longer for care.

There is an opportunity to introduce a new version of UCCs through advanced primary care. While we are not comfortable with the decision of Niagara Health to close the UCC, we are pleased with their support and acknowledgement that we need services currently offered at the UCC as listed below:

- The continuation of diagnostic imaging (X-ray and ultrasound) and community-based laboratory services.
- An after-hours option for primary and non-emergent care that offers extended weekday and weekend hours for both rostered and unrostered patients. This service should also cover procedures such as non-emergent stitches.
- The expansion of allied healthcare services to include areas such as physiotherapy, mental health, diabetes and chiropractic care.

I know your focus and expertise currently lies in primary care, and I am simply the mayor of a small city of 20,000 residents on the north shore of Lake Erie, but I am convinced that there are innovative primary care models that exist beyond our current reliance on family doctors, community health centres and family health teams. With proper support, UCCs or similar services could reduce pressure on emergency departments and deliver timely, high-quality care to people in both urban and rural communities. The research that informed the 2023 Auditor General of Ontario's Value-for-Money Audit on Emergency Departments supports this approach as being both cost-effective and inclusive.

I have a simple hope that everyone has an equal opportunity to be healthy. I look forward to supporting the community at this moment as I fully believe you and others in the province do as well. While the journey of healthcare transformation so far has been difficult for this community, the future has yet to be decided.

On behalf of the people of the City of Port Colborne, I strongly ask that any recommendations for primary care consider the unique set of circumstances faced by Ontario's rural communities,

support equitable access to primary care through the important services that a UCC or a similar model can provide, and expands the allied health services our community really needs.

Thank you so much for your time and for the work you are doing. I would greatly value the opportunity to speak with you or a member of your team. Our city staff and I stand ready to share our experience, our data, and our residents' stories with you, hopefully before your September announcement.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke, positioned to the right of the text "With gratitude,".

Mayor William Steele