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Policy Note No. 38 | December 2022

Slapping a Bandage on Health Care: The State of Physician Recruitment in Northern Ontario

Northern Ontario Insights Series

By: Kerem Karabeyoğlu

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Land Acknowledgement

NPI would like to acknowledge the First Peoples on whose traditional territories we live and work. NPI is grateful for the opportunity to have our offices located on these lands and thank all the generations of people who have taken care of this land.

Our main offices:

- Thunder Bay on Robinson-Superior Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and Fort William First Nation.
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- Kirkland Lake is on the Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of Cree, Ojibway, and Algonquin Peoples, as well as Beaverhouse First Nation.
- Each community is home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

We recognize and appreciate the historic connection that Indigenous peoples have to these territories. We support their efforts to sustain and grow their nations. We also recognize the contributions that they have made in shaping and strengthening local communities, the province, and Canada.

This report was made possible through the support of our partner, Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation. Northern Policy Institute expresses great appreciation for their generous support but emphasizes the following: The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Institute, its Board of Directors or its supporters. Quotation with appropriate credit is permissible.

Author's calculations are based on data available at the time of publication and are therefore subject to change.

Editor: Mark Campbell

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Published by Northern Policy Institute

874 Tungsten St.

Thunder Bay, Ontario P7B 6T6

ISBN: 978-1-77868-027-4

About the Author

Kerem Karabeyoğlu



Born and raised in Istanbul, Turkey, Kerem graduated in 2021 from the University of Western Ontario with a B.A. in Political Science. During his studies, Kerem developed a keen interest in the areas of Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Intergovernmental Cooperation. His academic focus was also directed towards International Peace-building and Transitional Justice studies. Immediately after graduating, kerem returned to Turkey to intern as a Junior Consultant in the Turkish Parliament. Now, back in Canada, he is pursuing his professional interests in promoting long-term sustainable development. An avid trail runner, soccer fan, and skier, kerem is also passionate about producing music in his free time.



Executive Summary

In the Spring of 2022, regional experts in Northern Ontario were interviewed to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities regarding the areas of food security, homelessness, mental health and addiction, immigration-migration, physician recruitment, and post-secondary education. The results of these key informant interviews led to unique insights into the state of these five subjects in Northern Ontario and highlighted the best avenues to address their challenges.

The insights received from experts are instrumental and shed light on the current conditions in the field. Learning from the individuals who have worked with and within local communities reveals opportunities to address these issues.

Findings primarily indicate a need for new policy strategies that effectively and holistically address some common issues:

1. Homelessness, mental health and addictions—alongside a lack of affordable housing, the transition between rehabilitation services or a correctional facility to life in society needs to be improved. Finally, a more collaborative approach with shared electronic records could yield a more effective and encompassing delivery of services;
2. Immigration—there is a lack of affordable housing for newcomers and a low retention rate in Northern Ontario. Additionally, the region needs to be better marketed to newcomers in order to address the existing labour shortages and high retirement rates;
3. Post-secondary institutions—in Northern Ontario suffer from a lack of funding generated by a freeze in tuition and funding levels. That is also true for Indigenous institutions, hampering their growth and stabilization. The attraction of international students has improved, but communities need to be welcoming to further attract and retain international students;
4. Food security—it has often been associated with food waste. However, insights suggest that income disparities are a more significant determinant of food insecurity. Moreover, having food that fits cultural preferences and nutritional needs is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, Indigenous land-based knowledge and self-determination present opportunities to address food security.
5. Physician recruitment—more funding and revised service agreements are needed to make health care jobs in Northern Ontario more attractive to newcomers, aligning financial incentives with position opportunities in smaller communities. As well, health professionals lack a better work-life balance, which hampers the attraction of more recent graduates to the region.

In sum, this series of insights highlighted some challenges that are perceived in Northern Ontario. However, these challenges also come with opportunities on which policymakers can act to improve the economy and quality of life in Northern Ontario.



Introduction

Good public policymaking does not happen in isolation. There are many individuals, organizations, and institutions that can – and do – provide valuable insight to decision-makers every day. As such, in the Spring of 2022, Northern Policy Institute interviewed regional experts about opportunities and challenges that exist for Northern Ontario in five different areas: food security; homelessness, mental health, and addiction; immigration-migration; physician recruitment; and postsecondary education. The results of these interviews can help inform new decision makers in the provincial and municipal governments.

Of course, policy advice does not stop there. Continuing to hear and learn from experts and other residents is important in ensuring policies and programs are appropriate for Northern Ontario's regions and communities from Timmins to Sachigo Lake First Nation to Powassan and everywhere in between.



Physician Recruitment

The health care system in Northern Ontario has significant gaps and poses considerable challenges for individual health care practitioners to do their work. This has resulted in inadequate health care assistance for those who need it. Even in the urban communities, there is a lack of “general practitioners, but also a lack of specialists here in Northern Ontario ... that is causing higher burdens and strain on the few numbers of health care practitioners [we have],” commented Natalya Brown, a researcher at Nipissing University. “A lot of people have to travel great distances to see specialists,” she added.

As a region, Northern Ontario has a population that needs higher levels of health care services. “There are higher rates of suicide, an increased burden of mental health issues, and a higher demand for health care in Northern Ontario,” commented Dr. Sarah Newbery, the dean of physician recruitment at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) University. The policies and incentives that have been put in place to address challenges such as low recruitment and retention rates in Northern Ontario need to be revised to support access to care. “There is a perception that the financial incentives may not be worth the challenges of living and working here,” Dr. Newbery noted.

To combat this issue, Brian Ross, PhD, MEd, a professor at NOSM, said additional funding could be secured to make jobs in the North more attractive to newcomers. “If you go to these small communities, there are more opportunities for leadership positions,” commented Dr. Ross. “But there needs to be stronger financial incentives to make the move.”

A common theme among many health care practitioners is the fact that they are burnt out. “Money is surely an incentive, but more and more health care practitioners are unhappy about the lack of time and a healthy work-life balance in their careers in Northern Ontario,” said Dr. Newbery. Increasingly, the graduate pool of physicians comprises women and couples who are both working and have young families. For busy clinicians to be good doctors and good parents, they must be supported. Through training local health care providers, NOSM has proven to be pivotal in recruiting physicians to the North. The situation on the ground, however, is that the learning curve for new graduates is very steep. Given the exhaustion among the health care workforce in Northern Ontario, support for up-and-coming doctors and health care providers needs to be at a higher level. “We need to be sure that we help our postgraduate learners to see a meaningful and manageable career to ensure that Northern Ontario is a great place to work as a physician,” said Dr. Newbery. One of the biggest opportunities to attract more new graduates is through marketing Northern Ontario and making it more desirable within the Ontario job market.

A key opportunity for sector growth is to focus on attracting and encouraging international medical graduates to establish themselves in Northern Ontario. Past efforts to recruit these graduates have fallen short in terms of offering welcoming communities and achieving retention. However, Dr. Newbery suggests a sound approach is the return of service agreements that serve to retain international medical graduates. But this contractual system needs to be further supported by creating more welcoming environments and addressing a lack of diversity in Northern Ontario.

Furthermore, the analyses of the level of health care provided to the region have focused too heavily on a head count approach, where the success of the overall system is based on the number of practitioners employed. More focus must be directed toward analyzing the level of services provided. The overall impact of the health care system can be improved by further understanding the improvements that can be made to support the existing health care workers in the region. To attain an economically vibrant north, a solid health care infrastructure is needed.



About Northern Policy Institute

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent, evidence-driven think tank. We perform research, analyze data, and disseminate ideas. Our mission is to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts our communities, our province, our country, and our world.

We believe in partnership, collaboration, communication, and cooperation. Our team seeks to do inclusive research that involves broad engagement and delivers recommendations for specific, measurable action. Our success depends on our partnerships with other entities based in or passionate about Northern Ontario.

Our permanent offices are in Thunder Bay, Sudbury, and Kirkland Lake. During the summer months we have satellite offices in other regions of Northern Ontario staffed by teams of Experience North placements. These placements are university and college students working in your community on issues important to you and your neighbours.

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