

## **BRIEFING NOTE TO ADDRESS ONTARIO'S HEALTHCARE CRISIS THROUGH SKILLED IMMIGRATION REFORM**

### **Purpose:**

This briefing note presents options and a recommendation to address Ontario's healthcare labour shortages by prioritizing skilled immigration for healthcare professionals. This proposal aims to ensure that Ontario's healthcare system can meet growing demands while maintaining sustainable immigration levels in other fields.

### **Background:**

Ontario is facing a severe shortage of healthcare professionals, including nurses, doctors, and support staff, which is placing significant strain on the province's healthcare system. This shortage has led to longer wait times, overworked staff, and reduced access to care for patients. For example, recent data shows that 2.5 million Ontarians lack access to a family doctor, and ER wait times are among the longest in the country due to overcrowding and understaffing. Simultaneously, high levels of immigration in non-healthcare fields create challenges related to employment, housing, and public services. Therefore, by prioritizing immigration for healthcare workers Ontario can effectively address labour shortages while ensuring that immigration policies align with Ontario's most pressing needs. The aging population and increasing healthcare demands further exacerbate the urgency of this issue, making it a top priority for the province.

### **Current Situation:**

- **Healthcare Labour Shortages:** Ontario is experiencing a critical shortage of healthcare professionals, with 2.5 million residents lacking access to a family doctor. This shortage is worsening due to an aging population and increasing healthcare demands. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a steady increase in the number of people visiting emergency departments.
- **Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP):** The province has implemented programs like the OINP to target skilled healthcare professionals, including internationally trained nurses and doctors. Recent initiatives, such as expanded bridging programs, aim to fast-track the integration of these professionals into the healthcare system. This program has more than doubled its recipients since 2022 while helping to address labour market shortages in healthcare and stimulating the economy.
- **Express Entry Draws:** While Ontario has issued invitations to healthcare workers through Express Entry draws, the number of invitations remains limited compared to the scale of the shortage. For example, in 2024 3000 healthcare workers from a variety of occupations were invited.
- **Impact on Healthcare System:** Without significant changes to immigration policies, Ontario's healthcare system will continue to struggle to meet the needs of its population, resulting in longer wait times, overcrowded ERs, and reduced quality of care. Moreover, due to hospital inefficiencies, there will continue to be steady delays in patient discharge and bed turnover rates. The Ontario College of Family Physicians predict that by 2026 1 in 4 Canadians (4.4 million) will be without a family doctor.

### **Options:**

Option 1: Modify the OINP to accept a maximum of 5000 skilled immigrant workers, focusing on individuals in health-related fields.

- The advantage of this option is that it creates an opportunity for skilled immigrants in healthcare to work in Ontario, thereby bolstering support within the field that will help millions of Ontarians.
- The disadvantage is this would stagnate immigration in Ontario. By focusing on individuals in healthcare, fewer immigrants would be accepted into the provinces under these new modifications.

Option 2: Create a new program apart from the OINP to target skilled immigrant workers in healthcare.

- The advantage of this option is it does not modify an existing program in Ontario. Strictly targeting healthcare workers, this option will bolster Ontario's healthcare by accepting a higher number of immigrant healthcare workers.
- The disadvantage is this model accepts a higher number of immigrants, adding to Ontario's already high immigration intake. Increasing the intake of immigrants will create risks to the province's infrastructure, and its already exacerbated employment situation, while also putting excessive strain on existing public services. Being an entirely different program, it will also require extra funding to operate.

Option 3: Increase funding for the Access Centre for Internationally Educated Health Professionals (IEHP).

- The advantage of this option is that more resources become available to incoming applicants looking to work in the healthcare field since the program specifically targets immigrant workers.
- The disadvantage of this option is the increased level of bureaucracy in the application process which requires further coordination from federal agencies. Additionally, this option is also more expensive for the applicant. While this program is also targeted towards immigrant healthcare workers, it does not directly increase the number of healthcare workers in Ontario.

### **Recommendation:**

Option 1 is recommended.

## References

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