

SPEAKING NOTES: HON. DOROTHY SHEPHARD, MINISTER OF HEALTH

Good afternoon. **Bonjour.**

It's a pleasure to share this time with you today.

Thank you to UNB for organizing this event. This type of engagement from the larger community is exactly what is needed as we work together to build a sustainable public health-care system.

Today I've been invited to give you an update on the development of the new five-year provincial health plan.

Put simply, the provincial health plan is a document that lays out the priorities for the health-care system and guides regional health authorities as they plan for and provide health-care services to New Brunswickers.

When we began talking about the development of the provincial health plan we knew it would be important that New Brunswickers understand the challenges we are facing.

That's why, in advance of the public engagement process, we released *Striving for Dependable Public Health Care, A Discussion Paper on the Future of Health Care in New Brunswick*, which outlines these challenges.

We know the demands being placed on the health-care system and those who work in it are extraordinary.

- Approximately 30 per cent of our hospital beds are occupied by seniors requiring care that could be better provided outside of a hospital's walls.
- Our emergency rooms are full of individuals who would be better served by their primary health-care provider or who can't be admitted because there is no space for them.
- Ninety per cent of us have a family doctor, but only 55 per cent can get an appointment with our physician within five days.
- In addition, our population is aging. By 2026, 26 per cent of our population will be over age 65 and our need for health-care services increases exponentially as we age.

Our workforce is also aging. The system is struggling with shortages of nurses, doctors, public-sector psychologists and other professionals.

In addition to addressing the challenges the system is facing, the discussion paper also lays out a vision for dependable public health care, a system that:

- Optimizes population health and well-being;
- Provides quality, patient-centred care, starting with access;
- Improves addiction and mental health outcomes;
- Improves the care and service experience of our seniors;
- Provides innovative care using digital technologies; and
- Maintains and invests in facilities, technology and equipment.

My goal is to have a health system where patients and providers are equally satisfied. I think that would be the most potent recruitment tool we could have.

There's a lot of work to do if we are to achieve this vision. But I think it's achievable if we all work together.

To start, I wanted to gather as much input as possible from the public and from the people working in the system.

COVID-19 certainly didn't make that easy. I would have much preferred to travel to communities and talk about health care with folks over coffee.

But COVID-19 does not allow for that so in the end we had a virtual tour via Zoom. In total, we held 49 meetings and talked to nearly 2,000 New Brunswickers of all ages.

We "visited" 15 communities in total, but that's not all.

As part of the process, I talked to doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners and allied health professionals. Many of them told me it was the first time a minister of health had consulted them directly on the development of a health plan.

I also talked to First Nations chiefs and health leaders, women, members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, health-care unions, stakeholder groups, linguistic groups, regulators and post-secondary institutions.

We've also received more than 500 email submissions and counting!

Every single idea we receive from New Brunswickers will be considered as part of the provincial health plan.

Through the public sessions we learned a lot about the gaps in the system and what's important to residents.

People were incredibly candid in sharing their experiences with the health system as well as their ideas about how it can be improved.

It's impossible to share all the ideas we heard in the short time we have today, but I will give you a few examples of the themes that began to emerge as we worked our way through the sessions.

The first one is prevention.

- We know that health starts at home. It starts with having a healthy, safe environment, healthy food to eat, the opportunity to move your body, the knowledge to make good decisions about the habits that are healthy and the ones that are not.
- The most beneficial health-care intervention is the one that never needs to be made at all. Prevention is the key to health and New Brunswickers said that loudly and clearly during our sessions.

New Brunswickers also made it clear that when they need to see a health-care provider, they expect one to be available in a timely manner.

I said earlier that 90 per cent of us have a family doctor. That doesn't sound so bad, right? But if you're in that 10 per cent, it means you have no choice but to go to the emergency department or use a walk-in clinic to get the most basic of health care.

To me, 90 per cent is not good enough. Every New Brunswicker deserves to have a primary health-care provider who they can get an appointment with in a reasonable amount of time.

The introduction of virtual visits during the pandemic has been a welcomed addition and has increased access to care. But we need to make sure that the care provided virtually is appropriate and that patient outcomes are measured.

Doing a better job of recruiting and retaining health-care professionals will certainly go a long way to addressing some of our primary health-care access challenges.

I committed during the budget process to moving recruitment under the Department of Health and we are currently exploring that. I firmly believe that recruitment needs to be centrally coordinated, and then carried out in partnership with the RHAs, clinicians and communities.

I also believe that recruiting health professionals needs to start early, when students are thinking about their future careers. Students need to be made aware of careers in health care right there in their community.

But it's not just the job of government or the regional health authorities to recruit. I believe that municipalities and communities have a big role to play in making their areas attractive to prospective providers.

That will look different in each community, but each area needs to start thinking about what they can contribute to the recruitment process.

Another thing we heard consistently was it doesn't matter how many excellent services are available, if the patient doesn't have the means to get to that specialist appointment or test or procedure, then it doesn't matter.

During the consultation we heard from patients who simply did not have the means to travel to their medical appointments.

We heard from doctors who gave money out of their own pocket to patients, so they could put gas in their cars to get to an appointment.

Transportation in a rural province such as ours is a huge barrier to health-care services and other services as well and I'm committed to exploring what we can do to make transportation less of a challenge.

Transportation is just one aspect of rural health care that needs to be addressed. Time after time during the engagement process, rural New Brunswickers expressed the importance of access to quality health care services.

We also heard from New Brunswickers that the health-care system can be a confusing place to be.

Whether it's navigation of the programs and services available or moving between facilities that don't seem to do a good job of communicating with each other, we know that improvements are necessary to provide the best experience possible to patients.

We also heard from francophones who made it clear that they can't rely on getting health-care services in their language of choice outside of Vitalité.

In a bilingual health-care system it's imperative that New Brunswickers can access services in their language of choice.

Another topic we heard about consistently was mental health and addiction.

About a month into the engagement process the department released its new five-year addiction and mental health action plan.

The new plan aims to address the increasing demand for addiction and mental health services.

We heard from New Brunswickers that the need for these services is greater than ever as they spoke about recent tragedies in our province and the need to do better. The recent budget included further investments in mental health programs.

We know that good health starts with good mental health and the provincial health plan will include further action in this regard.

Other topics that were consistently mentioned during the process related to better access to primary care for:

- seniors – with the need to keep seniors at home longer and better organize our long term care sector;
- women - with requests for more midwives, access to fertility treatments and gynecological care; and
- the 2SLGBTQIA+ community – with improved access to primary health care and fewer barriers to affirming health-care services.

One thing that became abundantly clear to me as I sat in front of my laptop night after night, listening to New Brunswickers talk about health care is this: New Brunswickers care about health care and they want to be engaged.

They want to be included. They want to see themselves reflected in the decisions that are made. And I think they deserve that.

The conversation that we've begun about health care is a conversation that is long overdue.

New Brunswickers should expect their elected leaders to address the challenges our health-care system is facing. We are currently living the reality that comes from not taking action: a system that doesn't meet the needs of patients and is a frustrating place to work for health professionals. We need to improve so that we can provide the quality care New Brunswickers deserve.

Our government wants to work with New Brunswickers to build a safe, sustainable health-care system that is responsive to the needs of patients and communities now and into the future.

We know that change is needed in our health-care system because it isn't sustainable as it is.

In the past when governments have tried to make changes, communities have not felt like they were part of the solutions.

Regardless of the intent, the impact is the same: there is a lot of distrust and fear in and around the health-care system.

In the absence of the change that is absolutely necessary to ensure its survival, the system is suffering from paralysis.

The future of the health-care system depends on the decisions we make right now.

The provincial health plan will be the foundation for the future of health care in our province and I believe that future is bright.

Every community and health-care facility has a role to play in our health-care system as we look to build a network of excellence that prioritizes patient care, safety and efficiency.

And almost every governmental department has a part to play as well. Addressing health-care challenges must not happen in silos. I've said it before and it bears repeating: If departments are not willing to leave their silos, I will take sledge hammers to them. Transportation and Infrastructure, Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, Justice and Public Safety, Social Development, Education and Early Childhood Education must all come to the table and work together.

Luckily my colleagues in government feel the same way. We are ready.

I don't care much of political legacies, but the utmost goal for my time as New Brunswick's Minister of Health is to leave a sustainable provincial health-care system that responds to the individual needs of the individual communities it serves.

We will put patients at the centre and we will have a plan to deliver clinical services so that we are responsive to the needs of the people living in this province.

We will ensure that every New Brunswicker has access to the health-care they need to be physically and mentally well.

We will ensure that these services are provided in the patient's language of choice.

We will have health care institutions that are physically and culturally safe.

We will rebuild our system on partnership and support it through research and innovation.

We will do this together.

I have committed to New Brunswickers, citizens and providers alike, that the conversation that we have started will continue.

I have no intention of giving the provincial health plan to the regional health authorities and checking that box and moving on.

There will be continuous engagement and we will measure our progress. We have a real opportunity before us.

We have the opportunity to build something that we can be proud of. We can be an example in excellence in health care.

But to do it, we need to be committed to working together and to finding new ways.

Thank you for sharing this time with me today. If you have ideas about how we can improve health care, please send them along to healthplansante@gnb.ca by May 15.

Every idea will be considered as we build a provincial health plan we can all be proud of.

Thank you. **Merçi.**