

OPSEU fights hospital cuts and closings

by Greg Hamara

Welland, Burk's Falls, Strathroy, Wallaceburg, Fort Erie, Port Colborne, Kincardine, Quinte West... the list of communities threatened with the loss of local hospital services grows longer. The past year was no exception.

In fact, for the first time since the unprecedented Harris government cuts of the mid-1990s, small and rural hospitals find themselves under threat of closure, emergency rooms are being shuttered, services are being privatized and hundreds of layoffs have been announced so far in 2009.

The McGuinty government believed this sort of attack on our public health care system might go undetected and that opponents to this sea change in services would quietly adapt to a new universe of Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs), Centres of Excellence and other so-called "rationalizations."

After all, the government had decided to fund hospitals at less than the rate of inflation resulting in operating deficits at more than 70 per cent of Ontario hospitals. Administrators responded by cutting back — or closing down altogether — local public health services.

OPSEU and its partners in the Ontario Health Coalition, along with community groups, local elected officials and other unions were quick to react. Together, they mounted a year-long campaign to fight back under the slogan: "Hospital Cuts Don't Heal."



Photo: Brian Willer

Leadership from all health sectors hold up postcards calling on Dalton McGuinty to stop cuts to public hospitals.

At town hall meetings across the province, communities affected by the threatened closures made it known, loud and clear, that they weren't prepared to allow their local hospitals to be shut down, or to witness badly-needed services farmed out to the private sector or to larger centres considerably further away.

The Ontario Health Coalition estimates that more than 10,000 people attended community meetings across the province to voice their opposition to the threat of closures and cutbacks.

The protests hit their peak on April 29 when more than 3,000 demonstrators gathered at Queen's Park to tell the government they wouldn't tolerate more cuts to public health services.

The demonstrations were effective. In several instances decisions on cutbacks to hospital closures and cuts to emergency room services were suspended or reversed altogether. And in May, the Minister of Health announced the formation of a task force to investigate health care services to rural and northern communities.

OPSEU and its allies know the fight to preserve public health care services is far from over. But as events of the past year have illustrated, the provincial government is capable of retreating from unpopular policies in the face of popular dissent. 