



HEALTHCARE RESOURCES FOR NEWCOMERS TO SARNIA-LAMBTON AN ASSET AND GAP ANALYSIS

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Overview

At the time of writing, the health services sector in Sarnia-Lambton, as in much of Ontario, is wrestling with a shortage of health professionals that is creating barriers to care, such as delays in treatment and a lack of access to primary care such as family doctors and nurse practitioners, the traditional gatekeepers to health care. In Sarnia, for instance, the number of residents without a primary care provider increased from just over 8,200 in 2020 to more than 10,000 by 2023 (Trevithick 2025).

For immigrants and temporary residents, systemic pressures complicate the navigation of an already complex system fraught with communication barriers. In recent years, the Sarnia-Lambton Ontario Health Team, a local network of approximately 40 partners, has been working towards addressing these issues both for the community at large and specific populations, such as immigrants and temporary residents, by establishing and implementing recruitment and healthcare navigation strategies and establishing new approaches to care (Sarnia-Lambton Ontario Health Team 2024). Comprised of local hospitals, mental health care organizations and other groups that provide care to specific populations such as First Nations communities, older adults and French speakers, and including services such as midwives and hospice, the team is funded by Ontario Health West, an arm of the provincial government.

In its 2023-2024 annual report, the health team notes several health issues within the region's population that are increasing pressure on the local health care system. Nearly a third of the Sarnia-Lambton region's population will be aged 65 years or older over the next 12 years. More than half of older adults have two or more chronic conditions, increasing the demand for acute services. Substance abuse and mental health have been identified as frequent users of emergency departments and alternative level of care beds in hospitals and also require a variety of community supports. The health team has identified adults over the age of 55 years and youth experiencing mental health and addiction issues as its two priority populations (S-L OHT 2024).

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With the local health system having to respond to these significant issues and changes, immigrants and temporary residents may experience longer waits to access health care in busy emergency rooms or from primary health care providers (Kula 2024); they may also experience extensive waits for treatment to problems that can arise from their unique circumstances. Not being able to obtain assistance in a timely manner can sideline a successful transition to a new community. Social isolation and loneliness, for instance, have long been identified as factors that can take tolls on immigrants and temporary residents' health and mental health and, more recently, particularly for immigrants who are seniors (Robert & Gilkinson 2012; McMaster University 2023). For this older population, risks include depression, social anxiety, coronary disease and dementia.

Physician Shortage

The doctor shortage directly affects immigrants and temporary residents by making it difficult for them to access primary care at the North Lambton Community Health Centre (NLCHC), a non-profit organization that provides health care to vulnerable populations. In June 2025 the centre, which provides services in Sarnia and the northern portion of Lambton County, noted on its website that its primary care clinic was unable to accept new patients (NLCHC n.d.-a).

To cope, immigrants and temporary residents are likely to adopt strategies similar to those of other residents in the region, such as the growing trend in Sarnia to seek medical assistance from hospital emergency departments for issues typically handled by family health practitioners (O'Brien 2024). This trend is also evident in Lambton Emergency Medical Services statistics. According to the services' recent master plan, roughly one quarter of all patients transported by ambulance are triaged at the lowest acuity levels, suggesting an inability to access a family doctor has prompted the emergency call or challenges with navigating the health system (County of Lambton 2023).

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A shortage of physicians is also affecting other essential aspects of local health care. In late 2024, Bluewater Health, the region's main hospital, was forced to divert general surgery services for a week because its complement of surgeons, normally standing at five, had shrunk to two (The Independent 2024). General surgery once again paused for a week in May 2025 (The Journal 2025). The scarcity also extends to several other specialties, including general paediatrics, psychiatry, pathology, and general internal medicine (O'Brien 2024).

Local authorities identify an aging population of healthcare providers as a main contributor to the situation. Nearly half of the family doctors currently serving the Sarnia Lambton region are over the age of 60 (O'Brien 2024). However, attracting new doctors is not easy. The region must compete with many other small urban or rural Ontario communities to attract new doctors. Current provincial rules prevent graduates of programs in other countries from securing residencies (Morden 2023). A lack of "turnkey clinics that are modern, co-located spaces that can house a minimum of three physicians," is also playing a role, says Carly Cos, a representative of Blue Coast Primary Care, an organization formed by the Sarnia-Lambton Chamber of Commerce to recruit doctors to the region (Hassan 2025). "New graduates and relocating physicians are not interested in investing in renovating clinics and currently we lack those clinics in Sarnia Lambton," Cos says (Hassan 2025).

But even before finding a primary physician, immigrants and temporary residents need to obtain health insurance coverage. Otherwise, they can expect to pay the full cost of services and procedures normally covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan unless they obtain private insurance. Some may qualify through programs such as the Interim Federal Health Program or OHIP. Even if they qualify for OHIP, immigrants and temporary residents must wait three months before coverage begins. In the interim, some programs do exist to treat those without health insurance (see Responses and interventions below), but the already significant strain on health care resources in the region may mean overcrowding as well in these programs and long waits. Steps to Justice (2022) does provide assistance and resources for migrant populations to determine whether they can obtain health care.

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Navigational and Cultural Barriers to Access

For residents, including those new to the region, a lack of clear information regarding service availability has been a persistent problem. A 2022 study by Lambton Public Health identified this information gap as the single greatest barrier to accessing care for older adults, noting that patients and caregivers were often left to coordinate care independently and without adequate follow-up between services (Hutchinson, Saucier, & Subotic 2022). Patients, quite simply, did not know where to go or who to contact for information. The study also found a lack of awareness about community supports and health services. It is likely that similar barriers face immigrants and temporary residents who are unfamiliar with the system, despite the system navigation support offered by settlement agencies to newcomers.

Navigating the system is particularly a challenge for non-English speakers. Some healthcare websites offer Google translation or versions in other languages, and many of these services also provide other translation services for those who need them. For instance, Bluewater Health offers its patients an on-demand translation app covering over 240 languages. (Boyce 2025).

Nevertheless, the service is inconsistent. Bluewater Health's basic materials, including its patient and family guide, a video intended to orient patients, and its official website, remain available only in English (Boyce 2025). This lack of translated material presents a significant barrier to equitable access.

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Responses and Interventions

The many organizations and healthcare agencies that make up the Sarnia-Lambton healthcare system have long acknowledged these issues and have instituted strategies to remedy them. Several online services help residents find family doctors who are accepting new patients. These include the provincial Health Care Connect program (<https://hcc3.hcc.moh.gov.on.ca/HCCWeb/faces/layoutHCCHomePage.xhtml>), Blue Coast Primary Care (<https://www.bluecoastprimarycare.com/>) and local family practice clinics (<https://rapidsfhteam.ca/physicians>). Lambton Public Health provides a web page (<https://lambtonpublichealth.ca/find-a-local-primary-care-provider/>) providing links to websites such as these to connect people with primary care. The website also provides health alerts and other data for issues such as water and air quality monitoring, disease outbreaks and inspection results (<https://lambtonpublichealth.ca/news/>).

To address the issue of connecting people to relevant health information, the Sarnia-Lambton Ontario Health Team, in partnership with hospitals in the southwestern Ontario region, has introduced ConnectMyHealth, an online, single-access portal (<https://info.connectmyhealth.ca/>) that allows people to view their health records from hospitals throughout the larger southwestern Ontario region. As of 2024, more than 500 people have registered with the digital app (S-L OHT 2024).

Programs are also offered for specific vulnerable populations. The NLCHC (North Lambton Community Health Centre) offers a Health Care for Agricultural Workers program, providing primary care and interpretation services to temporary migrant workers, regardless of their insurance status (NLCHC n.d.-b). The NLCHC also operates the First Five Program for children without a family doctor, for which a provincial health card is not required—an essential feature for newly arrived families that may still be in the process of acquiring identifying documents (NLCHC, n.d.-c).

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According to the Sarnia-Lambton Ontario Health Team's annual report, priorities for the 2024-25 fiscal year included establishing centralized access hubs for chronic disease management, community supports, and mental health to reduce wait times, adding supportive housing for mental health and addictions, and recruiting healthcare workers (S-L OHT 2024).

Recruitment Efforts

Long-term recruitment remains a central priority with local leaders calling for the establishment of local physician residencies to attract medical graduates (Morden 2023). Some initiatives currently exist. The Sarnia Community Foundation and the Norma and Don Moore Memorial Scholarship support doctors and nurse practitioners who have enrolled in a program that will lead to a license to practice in Ontario, with preference given to those planning to practice in Lambton" (Trevithick 2025). The long-running Discovery Week places first-year medical students at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry at Western University in Bluewater Health's Sarnia and Petrolia hospitals (The Journal 2025).

To enhance initiatives like these, the Sarnia Lambton Ontario Health Team has prioritized establishing partnerships with provincial educational institutions to create local internships to expose healthcare workers to the area (S-L OHT 2024). Investing in the local community and building from within, argues the Sarnia Lambton Ontario Health Team's primary care council, is the best way to address issues facing similar-sized communities across the province (S-L OHT 2024).

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Identified Needs and Recommendations

The following seven health and mental health sector organizations were surveyed as part of the community asset and gap analysis: St. Clair Child & Youth Services, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), The Pregnancy Options & Support Centre, Lambton Public Health, North Lambton Community Health Centre's (NLCHC's) Migrant Worker Project, Twin Bridges Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinic (NPLC), and Pathways Health Centre for Children. This section summarizes the following needs and recommendations identified by five of the seven respondents:

- **Expand Funding:** Increased funding from both the government and private organizations is necessary to support the development and delivery of essential services and programming for migrants, including health and mental health care services, language services and programs, transportation services, social services, employment services, legal aid services, and opportunities for community connections.
- **Reduce Barriers to Healthcare Access:** Individuals without OHIP coverage, such as temporary migrants, frequently encounter barriers to healthcare access. Receiving necessary and appropriate care can also be complicated by a lack of transportation, language barriers, and cultural differences. Advocacy is needed at the provincial and federal levels to expand coverage for those not currently eligible for OHIP. In addition to improving transportation services, mobile health and information services could be helpful for reaching those without personal modes of transportation. Translation and interpretation services should also be made available in healthcare contexts, and providers should employ culturally sensitive practices when interacting with clients; hiring a diverse workforce that mirrors the diversity of the community would further be helpful in this regard.

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- **Invest in and Develop Healthcare Supports:** Funding should be allocated for the procurement of specialized medical supports, such as those for augmentative and alternative communication, adaptive seating, and feeding. One respondent also commented that the development of a federal-provincial immunization registry, supported by the local health unit, would help to streamline the immunization process.
- **Invest in Transportation Services:** Reliable and affordable transportation remains a major barrier, especially for those living in rural areas of Lambton County. Expanding the availability of transportation services, such as those provided by the NLCHC's Migrant Worker Project, would improve access to employment opportunities, community events, and essential health and social services. Specific suggestions for cost-effective mobility solutions included a volunteer-run driving service and a bike bank.
- **Invest in Language Supports and Services:** Access to language supports and services—including interpretation and translation services—should be expanded to ensure that migrants can effectively navigate health and social services. English/French as a Second Language programs and English/French conversation circles would also provide migrants with valuable opportunities to develop and practice their language skills and connect with others in the community.
- **Increase Affordable Housing Options:** There is a critical need for housing options that are affordable and that meet the needs of migrants, particularly those working in temporary or seasonal roles and those residing in rural parts of the region.
- **Increase Data Collection and Dissemination Efforts:** Collection and dissemination of data pertaining to the migrant community in Sarnia-Lambton would facilitate a better understanding of the migrants in the region, including who they are and what they need to thrive.

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- **Foster Collaborations:** Collaboration between the local government, non-profit organizations, health and mental health care providers, educational institutions, and community centres will help to foster a more effective, coordinated, and informed approach to service provision. Designating a “champion” to lead the effort of improving services for migrants will help to ensure that actions are taken and progress is made.
- **Support Community-Wide Education:** Public education campaigns and outreach focused on the needs and rights of immigrants and temporary migrants will help to foster inclusion and support for these individuals.
- **Promote Community Building:** Both migrants and non-migrants alike would benefit from the creation of more welcoming spaces and opportunities for social interaction. Community and cultural events, gatherings, and activities would help migrants integrate into the community and build local support systems, boost mental health, and reduce feelings of homesickness. They would also provide opportunities to honour the diverse cultural identities of those living in the region and showcase these identities to other members of the community. Specific ideas suggested by respondents include international fairs, holiday dinners, women’s wellness day events, and recreation and fitness nights. Holding events such as these in community spaces would be particularly beneficial for migrant workers, who may not otherwise have many opportunities to socialize outside of their place of employment.

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