

6 December 2021

To: Hon. Blaine Higgs, Premier of New Brunswick

Minister of Health, Dorothy Shephard

Dr. John Dornan, CEO Horizon Health

Janet Hogan, Corporate Director of Communication, Horizon Health

Christa Wheeler-Thorne, Administrative Director, Horizon Health

Eileen MacGibbon, VP Clinical Services, Horizon Health

Cc: Mayor Shawn Mesheau, Mayor Jason Stokes, Mayor Debbie Wiggins-Colwell, Maire Maxime Bourgeois, Chief Rebecca Knockwood



Dear government and Horizon Health representatives:

### **URGENT**

We expect the courtesy of your reply to this letter by **4pm on Tuesday December 7th**, as we will be planning further action after that time.

We are **appalled** by the announcement we received by email on **Friday at 4:42pm**, informing our community that local acute care patients are being moved out, and that Sackville Memorial Hospital is being turned into a Long Term Care holding facility.

Your action goes against so much of what we felt we were working collaboratively with Horizon Health toward, and also obviously negates the vision and spirit of the **“Stabilizing Healthcare – An Urgent Call to Action”** plan released the week before. Indeed, it seems that **our community has been offering an urgent call to action to stem the hemorrhaging of local nursing staff, while the government has actually been fostering the circumstances that create job-leaving morale, uncertainty of services, and ultimately, disappearance of rural health services for thousands of citizens.**

You would think that we had anticipated the Call to Action document by our activities, as a community, since last June. We agreed to a respectful, collaborative relationship with Horizon Health, earnestly believing that we all were working toward the same goals, i.e. maintenance of acute care and ER services at the Sackville Memorial Hospital, growing nursing staff complements for these services, and enticing new medical personnel to serve southeast New Brunswick. We mobilized dozens of local volunteers and raised thousands of local dollars to develop and fund effective new recruitment materials and strategies in collaboration with Horizon staff and efforts (despite Horizon's as-yet lack of commitment to paying its own share).

On October 28<sup>th</sup>, we appreciated the heads-up meeting to which we were invited by Horizon representatives, where we were informed of staffing difficulties and so plans that our ER would have limited hours beginning November 19<sup>th</sup>. We recall that Dr. Dornan told us that although we

had 13 ER nurses, we did not have enough nursing staff for acute care, so the reduced ER hours would free up nurses for acute care. Questions were answered; relationships were built. We had expected that this type of informative and consultative approach would continue, and so we pursued further collaborative meetings.

Apparently, that meeting was a one-off. This time (although Horizon staff spoke with our Mayor two days before and nothing was said) you chose to stealthily send an end-of-week email announcement that local patients had to move out of SMH, to make room for LTC patients instead. There are so many ways that this action demonstrates that Horizon Health has no intention to work with us genuinely and collaboratively. Our "shared" recruitment activities and investments are now for nursing positions that are no longer available. The LTC role of SMH will threaten the sustainability of other services (ER needs for acute care bed admissions; lab work; x-ray). This is insulting and deeply concerning.

Your action shows a complete disregard for the wishes of our community, the contributions of our local municipal dollars, and our local values of trust and truth-telling. The absence of extraordinary measures, on the part of Horizon Health and of the Government of New Brunswick, to retain and recruit nurses and doctors doesn't match the severity of the situation here in Tantramar (a local MD has described this crisis as more threatening to our community than Covid-19).

You are insulting and wasting the hundreds of hours of skilled volunteer time we have given, and thousands of dollars we have raised locally. Our marketing expert notes that "nothing kills a bad product faster than good advertising". Are you not curious as to why Dr. Dornan said we have 13 ER nurses in October, but our count in December is just 4? We know several who slipped across the border to Amherst, where the pay and working conditions are much better. We sounded the alarm and predicted this exodus to Horizon months ago. We know that Horizon's threats and cutting of services accelerated the process. And now medical staffing is threatened as well. It is either very bad management, or is it your goal to completely dismantle healthcare for rural New Brunswickers?

We are quite certain that you have not considered the ramifications of this action. This directly threatens the success of Mount Allison University, one of the top universities in Canada. This past week, a student sat in the ER in Moncton for 13 hours with a broken limb, unattended. We believe that parents will now think twice about sending their students to a community with no healthcare services.

We are angry, and we plan to advise the Town of Sackville, and all of its citizens, to cease its support or funding for anything related to Horizon Health (e.g. supporting recruitment efforts, donations for hospital equipment, confidence in your words, etc) if we don't see the following immediately addressed:

- quick action and public commitment to return the Sackville Memorial Hospital to 24/7 ER services and 21 acute care beds, as before
- Horizon budget commitments in line with ours, to continue our collaboration on recruitment
- honest staffing numbers, needs and predictions, so our recruitment efforts will be honest and successful

We feel that you have fundamentally broken our relationship. We are embarrassed by our efforts to recruit people for jobs you seem to have no plans to actually offer. We are humiliated in the face of increasing numbers of citizens who 'told us so' about the government's disingenuous nature. We believe that you don't even understand your own Action Plan; it's folly to think you can do 'business as usual' and then expect different results.

Although this was predicted 2 decades ago, the past 2 years has amply demonstrated that our healthcare system is in crisis. Staff are demoralized. There is no goodwill or cushion left. In order to save healthcare for New Brunswickers, we need every willing voice, skill and actor involved. This must welcome and include communities, respectfully and collaboratively.

We need to ensure healthcare equity for rural New Brunswickers. We expect honesty and respect. We have, so far, been quiet and optimistic. We have run out of patience.

We expect more than an apology. We expect to see a plan and commitment to stop the bleeding, and return equitable healthcare to our region, through 24/7 ER and acute care hospital services.

We look forward to hearing from you by 4pm on Tuesday December 7<sup>th</sup>, as our Task Force is meeting with regional leaders that evening, to confirm our further collective actions.

Sincerely,

Pat Estabrooks and John Higham BA, MRM

co-Chairs, Rural Health Action Group

Margaret Tusz-King B.Sc.(Pharm), M.Ed.

co-Chair, Tantramar Community Task Force

