

## Topic Overview

# Improving Care and Support for Unpaid Caregivers in Ontario

Citizen panel  
8 November 2014

The McMaster Health Forum convened a citizen panel on the subject of improving care and support for unpaid caregivers in Ontario. The panel was organized with the support of McMaster University's Labarge Optimal Aging Initiative and the Government of Ontario (through a Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care Health System Research Fund grant entitled *Harnessing Evidence and Values for Health System Excellence*). The panel brought together 10 citizens from the regions covered by three Local Health Integration Networks: Hamilton Niagara Haldimand Brant; North East; and North Simcoe Muskoka. Participants examined the problem, options for addressing it, and key implementation considerations. The purpose of the panel was to guide the efforts of policymakers, managers, and professional leaders who make decisions about our health system.

## Discussing the problem

Panel participants discussed challenges related to improving care and support for unpaid caregivers in Ontario. During the deliberations, the following four challenges were consistently raised: 1) caregivers' heavy burden can cause anxiety about its impact on their own and other's health; 2) financial and employment impacts of caregiving are substantial; 3) many caregivers don't know about available services or how to access them; and 4) caregivers' roles are not fully recognized or supported.



*The views expressed in the panel summary are the views of panel participants and should not be taken to represent the views of the Government of Ontario, McMaster University, McMaster University's Labarge Optimal Aging Initiative, or the authors of the panel summary.*





Ten citizens from the regions covered by three Local Health Integration Networks (Hamilton Niagara Haldimand Brant, North East, and North Simcoe Muskoka) gather during a McMaster Health Forum event on 8 November 2014.

## Discussing the options

Participants reflected on three options (among many) for improving care and support for unpaid caregivers in Ontario: addressing the economic security of unpaid caregivers (option 1); engaging and supporting unpaid caregivers (option 2); and providing tailored training and supports to unpaid caregivers who care for older adults with complex conditions (e.g., dementia) (option 3).

Several values-related themes emerged during the discussion about these options, with two emerging with some consistency: 1) competence (i.e., educating and training unpaid caregivers to provide optimal care, but also to clearly define the scope of duties of unpaid caregivers versus other healthcare providers); and 2) empowerment (i.e., supporting unpaid caregivers to become strong advocates for their loved ones and for themselves, and equipping them with practical tools to manage the complex care needs of their loved ones).

## Panel deliverables

To learn more about this topic, consult the [citizen brief](#) that was presented to participants before the panel and the [summary](#) of the panel. For an electronic copy of the citizen brief or panel summary, visit our website [www.mcmasterhealthforum.com](http://www.mcmasterhealthforum.com) and click on 'Products' along the sidebar.

## Discussing the implementation considerations

When turning to potential barriers to improve care and support for unpaid caregivers in Ontario, participants focused on five key barriers: 1) a universal and equitable system to financially support unpaid caregivers may not be sustainable; 2) new tax measures to increase financial assistance will most likely face resistance from taxpayers; 3) deteriorating community cohesiveness; 4) many unpaid caregivers are already stretched too thin to be engaged meaningfully in decision-making processes; and 5) many unpaid caregivers lack access to family doctors. Participants then turned to two key factors that could facilitate efforts to bring about change: 1) advocacy activities targeting health system-leaders and elected officials to implement the necessary policies, programs and services; and 2) activities to promote public dialogue and support experiential learning to build sensitivity to the needs of older adults and their unpaid caregivers.



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