

## **NEWS RELEASE**

### **Rural Health Action Group Reviews Efforts to Restore Hospital Services**

With the coming of the New Year, Tantramar's Rural Health Action Group will mark close to 18 months of energetic action on health services in the region.

The group had already been discussing the quality and availability of rural health care for some months when, in June 2021, Horizon announced that Emergency services at the Sackville Memorial Hospital would be reduced to eight hours per day on Saturdays and Sundays.

The news triggered a swift reaction. Ongoing work on a draft health plan was accelerated and shared with the newly elected Sackville Town Council. It was not surprising, then, that local concern reached a new peak in late October of that year, when Horizon declared that, owing to a shortage of physicians and nurses, the reduction in service would be extended to seven days a week.

Fears that the hospital might close, or be converted to a long-term care facility, were met with such widespread community resistance that, near the end of October 2021, Dr. John Dornan, then CEO of Horizon, met with the Council to reassure them of his view that the closures, would be temporary. In December, Dr. Dornan offered the same assurance to the chairs of RHAG.

By January 2022, the Action Group had reviewed the situation at the hospital more thoroughly and realized that the overnight closures were, in reality, the result of years of neglect and cutbacks. Acute care beds had been closed. Day surgery was virtually eliminated, and staff vacancies had been left unfilled.

The members of the Rural Health Action Group realized that constructive solutions to these challenges could only be achieved through proactive collaboration with

Horizon. Fortunately, Horizon was of the same opinion. March saw the first constructive meeting between RHAG and senior Horizon staff take place, and by June 2022 the signing of a collaboration agreement was announced leading to monthly steering committee meetings, and weekly reviews of operational progress.

Through the summer, Horizon took action to restore staffing levels and acute-care beds. Greater administrative authority was returned to the Sackville unit, and improvements in staff morale were soon evident. As autumn advanced, repairs to the Emergency Room are underway, and Horizon committed to invest in the Sackville Hospital operating rooms, which would be ready to return to service in the New Year.

On a broader level, Horizon also established a Community Engagement office with a mandate to reach out and work with community groups with a view to improving the overall patient experience and to ensure all New Brunswickers receive the quality care they need.

At the beginning of this December, RHAG presented Horizon with an extensive vision statement of the range of services and modes of delivery that will be required to ensure the availability of quality health care to in rural Westmorland County. Horizon will consider these proposals over the holiday season.

The coming new year will see a focus on recruitment of more physicians to locate and practice in the Tantramar region, and on constructive collaboration with Horizon to develop an ongoing model for community participation in health care service and in its governance.