



## Community Update JANUARY 2024

Last year at this time, Rural Health Action Group (RHAG) volunteers felt secure that the threats of closures and reduced services at the Sackville Memorial Hospital would finally be behind us. Although we knew things would likely never be the same, the goal was to return the hospital to a reasonable level of urgent and critical care services.

The focus for 2023 was to collaborate with Horizon Health Network (HHN) on marketing and recruitment efforts to secure medical professionals, update facilities, and reimagine primary care services in the region to better support both healthcare workers and patients.

That collaboration was active in 2023, with regular meetings, updates, and shared planning. HHN staff were delegated responsibilities regarding measurable outcomes, and Interim President and CEO of Horizon Health Network Margaret Melanson agreed to attend community meetings to ensure that there was direct accountability to the community for Horizon's actions.

### Progress in 2023

Some of the more visible outcomes of the past year include:

- Fewer closures of the emergency department at Sackville Memorial Hospital (SMH);
- Almost 100% increase in Ambulatory Care Clinic patients seen at SMH;
- Relocation of mental health and public health services from the hospital to nearby locations;
- Renovations inside the hospital for the Beal University nursing program, which starts in April;
- Expansion and upgrading of hospital parking space;
- Creation of the Tantramar Community Health Centre (TCHC) to access healthcare for those who recently lost their family doctors and have urgent medical needs (see page 2);
- A vision to expand TCHC services to include more patients currently without family doctors.

### Community Action is Vital

As a community, we've learned a lot about our health care system, and how challenging it can be to create change. Even if we have great ideas for services and programs, it's the provincial Department of Health that holds the purse strings. We also know there are things that communities can do that neither Horizon nor the Department of Health can do, to rescue healthcare for our region—community action is vital.

Currently, in our role as RHAG volunteers, we are:

- Actively developing new tools for the community to attract medical professionals, showcasing our amazing community, and introducing prospective professionals to people and places;
- Monitoring Horizon Health Network plans, to ensure that they meet our rural needs; and
- Creating more opportunities for local residents to become involved in improving health services as we expand our mandate toward mobilizing community assets.

Looking to next year, we envision new opportunities for long-term engagement in healthcare, in collaboration with Horizon Health Network. Both Strait Shores and Tantramar have municipal representatives on RHAG, and we wonder if there is a larger role for municipal government going forward. Do we have resources and a mandate at this level of government to lead the consistent communication, engagement, and influence that has so far made our efforts successful? Or, is another form of local action required? Hopefully, 2024 will bring clarity to this question.

Sincerely,

Pat Estabrooks and John Higham  
*Co-Chairs, Rural Health Action Group*

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## Updates on Primary Healthcare

### “I’ve lost my doctor, what should I do?”

It can be confusing, trying to figure out how and where to access health care when we need it, especially when we’ve lost our family doctor. Although there are services available, it’s difficult to know where to turn first.

Similar challenges in our health care system are shared by physicians and other service providers, many of whom are feeling overwhelmed and exhausted in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Health care workers are burned out and seeking opportunities to reduce stress in their working lives.

### Tantramar Community Health Centre

The Tantramar Community Health Centre seeks to provide a way forward for primary health care delivery. It doesn’t answer everyone’s needs right now, but it fills some large gaps, and will eventually be the go-to place for primary health care services.

Currently, the TCHC is booking appointments with patients who recently lost their family doctor and have urgent medical needs. These include patients of Dr. Cathy Johnston, Dr. Andrea Wall, and Nurse Practitioner Angela Tower, and will soon include patients of Dr. Adrian Kelly.

The Centre uses the *Patient Medical Home* or *Family Health Team* model of primary care delivery. That means patients have access to a team of medical professionals, including physicians, nurses, admin staff, and other specialists. And, it frees up time for physicians to focus on patient care, without having to manage a practice of their own.

In other words, the traditional model of having a family doctor is being replaced by this team-based approach. The Tantramar Community Health Centre replaces your family doctor with a team of health care professionals, so you can access the type of care you need, when you need it.

*The long-term goal is to recruit more staff to the Centre, so that the TCHC can eventually become the main provider of primary health care services for all residents of Tantramar and Strait Shores.*

### “But, what do I do in the meantime?”

If you don’t have a family doctor, have recently lost your family doctor or nurse practitioner, or are new to the province and have a Medicare card, and did not already register with Patient Connect NB (the old registry for patients waiting to be referred to a new primary care provider), you should register now with NB Health Link.

### What is NB Health Link?

NB Health Link is the new provincial program for both waiting list registration and interim services you can access while you wait for referral to a primary care provider.

The easiest way to register with NB Health Link is by calling 811.

You can also register online. Go to [nbhealthlink.ca](https://nbhealthlink.ca); click on the *Registration* link; answer *No* to Question 1 then continue to Question 2. If you have a Medicare card answer *Yes*, then click on *Request Referral Form*. Choose *Patient Registration* to go to the registration page. Once you complete the form, it will take at least two weeks before you receive confirmation that you are on the waiting list and can access interim services through NB Health Link.

### What is Maple?

Maple is a for-profit online service that gives patients across Canada access to virtual healthcare 24/7. Once you set up an account at [getmaple.ca](https://getmaple.ca), and download the Maple app, you will be connected with a doctor or nurse practitioner from your region. They can discuss symptoms, answer questions, provide a diagnosis, prescription, or lab requisition, and may request to speak with you by text, phone, or video. If a service is not covered by Medicare, you will be charged a fee for service, which may be covered by private medical insurance. Find out more at [getmaple.ca](https://getmaple.ca).

**WHO ARE WE?** The Rural Health Action Group is a working group of community volunteers actively helping to ensure that we have consistent access to local healthcare services.

RHAG collaborates with Horizon Health Network in their efforts to recruit and retain physicians and nurses in the province, and provide local healthcare services.

We are a group of 15-20 volunteers representing residents of Tantramar and Strait Shores, Mount Allison University students and staff, medical professionals, service groups, and community leaders.