

# Hospital CEO makes case for more beds in Sudbury

'Northerners know that HSN was built too small,' Dominic Giroux tells chamber audience



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Dominic Giroux, CEO of Health Sciences North, addresses a Chamber of Commerce luncheon series audience on Wednesday. *JIM MOODIE/SUDBURY STAR*

With patient overflow at an all-time high, Health Sciences North wants to create more space at the Ramsey Lake Health Centre for beds.

And that could entail its central tower getting taller.

"Our overcrowding pressures continue," HSN CEO Dominic Giroux told a Chamber of Commerce luncheon audience Wednesday.

As 2019 began, the hospital experienced its "highest number of admitted patients," he said, and on Wednesday morning there were 76 people

awaiting a proper bed — 30 in the emergency department, and 46 in “what we call unconventional bed spaces.”

Giroux said many other hospitals in the province are also struggling with over-occupancy, “but Sudbury is the most acute situation right now in the northeast.”

Last year, there were just 18 days when the hospital was below capacity, he noted. And last Wednesday a record-high 539 patients were admitted at HSN.

Of those, 34 were waiting in emerg, 44 were placed in unconventional beds, and 107 were considered alternative level of care patients, meaning they would ideally be transferred to another setting like a nursing home.

Giroux said the bed crunch is a “daily challenge,” and while staff members are doing their best, it is not a sustainable situation over the long term, especially as the population ages.

“At this point we’re not in a situation where we feel the quality of care or safety is compromised, but our role is to look at the future,” he said. “We can’t afford, 10 years or 20 years from now, to be in the same situation or even worse.”

With that in mind, HSN has embarked on an update of its capital master plan, with top priorities being to increase the number of patient beds, and reduce the number of sites the organization maintains.

“Our reality is that while we were intended to be a one-site hospital, we have 13 civic addresses within city limits,” Giroux said. “You may not know all those addresses, but it speaks again to the fact we’re short on space. We have 13 sites, and yet we have patients in the ER and more in unconventional bed spaces.”

One of the sites utilized by HSN, the old Memorial Hospital, has changed little since it opened in 1956, he noted. “It was supposed to close in 2010, so the hospital, rightly so, did not do a lot of capital or maintenance investments.”

Meanwhile, the Ramsey Lake Health Centre on Paris Street is too cramped. “Northerners know that HSN was built too small,” said Giroux.

New floors could be added to the centre tower of the hospital, however, as it was “designed to accommodate vertical expansion,” he said. “It could be horizontal as well, but we’re pretty limited in terms of options there.”

Finalizing an expansion plan and gaining the necessary approvals and funds will not happen overnight.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my 16 months in health care, it’s that capital planning in health is not a sprint, it’s a marathon,” said Giroux. “It’s a multi-year effort, with a five-stage planning process, and right now we’re at stage one.”

The organization is working with consultants to “evaluate the needs for the future,” he said, and “in the next few months will be working with an architect to determine the optimal physical configuration to meet those needs.”

In the interim, HSN has created an additional unit on the first floor of the Ramsey Lake Health Centre to alleviate pressure, he said, and is proposing to “repurpose square footage” for 37 new beds (although the net increase would be 20 beds, as some unconventional spaces now in use would be made more permanent).

Those renovations would cost \$3.5 million and require ministry approval, but “should there be provincial resources, we have a short-term solution that is readily available,” said Giroux.

While the current bed crunch can be partially attributed to seasonal illness and winter wipeouts, the CEO said there would still be capacity to handle the surge had a decision not been made 16 years ago to scale back the size of the hospital.

“When the concept of the one-site hospital was designed originally, there was a subsequent review done in 2003 that reduced the number of beds and the scope of the capital construction by 86 beds,” he said. “So if it weren’t for that reduction in 2003, we would not be facing the issues we are today.”

A one-site model may still be the ideal scenario, but Giroux said it isn’t an imminent likelihood.



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