

# Results prove value of proactive physician recruitment, retention

Tuesday, September 23, 2008

It is an unfortunate fact that many people in Sault Ste. Marie do not have a family doctor – also that there are deficiencies in many areas of medical specialty.

Although health care is not a specific function of local government, City Council has long recognized that a physician shortage affects quality of life for residents and impacts its ability to attract new industry to the community. Newcomers to the community want to be assured that they will have a family doctor and that specialists will be available if and when needed.

In 2001, Council established a Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee in a proactive effort to recruit and retain doctors. This committee was one of the first of its kind in the country, comprised of representatives of the City, Sault Area Hospital, Group Health Centre, Algoma District Medical Group, Algoma West Academy of Medicine, the Chamber of Commerce, and the community at large.

The City of Sault Ste. Marie is the committee's largest funding partner, investing more than \$400,000 annually from casino revenues. Sault Area Hospital and the Group Health Centre each commit \$100,000 annually. The Algoma West Academy of Medicine provides in-kind contributions through physician involvement.

The mandate of the Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee is to create and implement a city-wide medical manpower plan for family physicians and specialists to meet community needs, incorporating service requirements of the Sault Area Hospital and the Group Health Centre.

The committee has been remarkably successful.

Thirty-six physicians have signed four-year contracts to practice in Sault Ste. Marie since 2002. Thirty-three of these doctors have continued practicing here after their contracts were completed. In contrast, 24 physicians came to the city between 1996 and 2001, but 23 left over the same time period.

Between 1997 and 2002, only one physician with roots in Sault Ste. Marie returned to the city to practice. Since the Recruitment and Retention Committee was established, eleven physicians with local roots have returned to their hometown to practice.

In 2008, the committee set a target to recruit eight specialists. To date, that goal has not only been achieved, but surpassed!

With the new medical school now fully operational in Northern Ontario, there is hope that, commencing in 2011, graduates will choose to practice in Sault Ste. Marie.

Eight Northern Ontario School of Medicine third-year students arrived in the Sault this month and will remain in the community until April 2009 receiving exposure to family practice and specialties under the guidance of local physicians.

Staff from the Physician Recruitment and Retention Program, accompanied by local physicians, regularly attend medical conferences across the country to market Sault Ste. Marie and attract physicians to the community. Conferences in specialist areas where the City is underserved are targeted.

Ontario's five medical schools are visited regularly, and staff keeps in contact with medical learners from Sault Ste. Marie. Various events for students are hosted in the Sault over school breaks, etc.

Sault Ste. Marie is not alone in the challenge to recruit physicians. According to recent reports, Ontario is short 2,000 physicians. Consequently, our Physician and Recruitment Committee is in stiff competition with other communities. While the City was at the forefront in creating a committee to attract and retain physicians in 2001, it now competes with hundreds of others.

Recruitment efforts include financial incentives to physicians to locate in Sault Ste. Marie and facilitating spousal employment in the community. The committee showcases all that our City has to offer – recreationally, culturally, and educationally.

Superior medical technology available in our community (i.e. MRI, CT scan, angiography, nuclear medicine) and the advent of a new state-of-the-art hospital contribute to recruitment efforts. The group-practice model offered by the Group Health Centre is another inducement for new doctors.

Quality of life benefits unique to our community such as: the proximity of outdoor recreational activities, lack of traffic congestion, and a low cost of living compared to larger urban centres are definite assets in attracting physicians to Sault Ste. Marie.

While physician recruitment is a critical function, it is also imperative that doctors already practicing in the community are retained. To this end, the Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee maintains a database of all local physicians and hosts a variety of events (i.e. golf tournaments, receptions, ski days) as networking opportunities and as a token of the community's gratitude for the invaluable services of these professionals.

Your City Council has been proactive in recognizing and responding to the need to recruit and retain physicians. The committee established by Council, which now serves as a model to other communities, has clearly made significant progress in improving healthcare in Sault Ste. Marie.

Rachel Tyczinski is the Corporate Affairs Officer for the Corporation of the City of Sault Ste. Marie