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## NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release  
2023HLTH0125-001608  
Oct. 18, 2023

Ministry of Health

### **Patients will get better emergency care in Merritt, Oliver, Salmon Arm**

VICTORIA – Patients in Merritt, Oliver and Salmon Arm and surrounding communities will soon have better access to emergency care, as the Province committed \$7.5 million in permanent funding to help stabilize physician emergency-room coverage in hospitals in these communities.

“B.C., like all jurisdictions in Canada, is facing recruitment-and-retention challenges that were exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing toxic-drug crisis and the rising number of patients with complex health-care needs, and we know that these challenges are more prominent in rural and remote communities,” said Adrian Dix, Minister of Health. “That is why we are taking immediate actions to bolster the recruitment of more physicians for our patients and their care teams.”

The provincial commitment was approved on Oct. 10, 2023, for the Nicola Valley Hospital and Health Centre in Merritt, and the Shuswap Lake General Hospital in Salmon Arm. The commitment was approved on Sept. 29, 2023, for the South Okanagan General Hospital in Oliver. Interior Health is working with local physicians on the three service contracts for emergency services at these hospitals.

“We’re pleased to be moving forward with new compensation models for physicians in our rural communities,” said Susan Brown, president and CEO, Interior Health. “This is another step forward to stabilizing health services for rural residents as it will support our recruitment efforts going forward.”

The new contracts will help the Province’s efforts to recruit more physicians in rural communities as they will compensate them for their time spent at the hospital caring for patients with complex and time-intensive needs. This departs from the fee-for-service payment model under which physicians are paid based primarily on the number of patients they see in a day.

With these service contracts, all patients and nurses will benefit from more regular onsite physician presence, which will help emergency rooms in these hospitals remain open.

Implementing the new service contracts will be in accordance with the terms of the physician master agreement between the Province and Doctors of BC. The agreement drives continued collaboration by the Ministry of Health, physicians, Doctors of BC and regional health authorities to achieve key priorities that improve health care, including gender equity, Indigenous reconciliation and workplace safety. All of this aims to better support doctors as they care for their patients.

“These significant investments will help stabilize emergency-department services due to

staffing shortages in Oliver, Merritt and Salmon Arm,” said Roly Russell, MLA for Boundary-Similkameen. “Our acute-care centres are essential for ensuring residents get the care they need, when they need it, and close to home. This new service contract with physicians, along with the multitude of other current actions, will support our health-care professionals and build a stronger foundation for a more reliable and stronger rural health-care system.”

The new contracts build on short, medium and longer-term efforts that the Province and Interior Health are taking to stabilize emergency-department services in rural and remote communities.

“This investment will help ensure patients have stable access to emergency care, while we know there is more to do,” Dix said. “Through our Health Human Resources Strategy, we are also committed to train, recruit and retain more people into our workforce, including providing incentives to attract physicians working in rural communities such as Merritt, Salmon Arm and Oliver.”

This announcement is part of B.C.’s Health Human Resources Strategy announced on Sept. 29, 2022. The strategy puts patients first by ensuring they get the health services they need and are cared for by a healthy workforce. It focuses on 70 key actions to recruit, train and retain health-care workers, while redesigning the health-care system to foster workplace satisfaction and innovation.

**Learn More:**

To learn about the Physician Master Agreement, visit:

<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2022HLTH0212-001619>

To learn about the Health Human Resources Strategy, visit:

<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2022HLTH0059-001464>

A backgrounder follows.

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## BACKGROUND

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### **Actions to keep emergency departments open in Merritt, Oliver, Salmon Arm**

The Province, together with Interior Health, is actively working to stabilize emergency department services in Merritt, Oliver and Salmon Arm. Short-, medium- and long-term actions efforts for the communities include:

- providing temporary compensation supports to attract physician locums in the short term;
- working with GoHealthBC to recruit registered nurses;
- advertising with Health Match BC and implementing a targeted social media and marketing campaign for nurses and physicians;
- exploring team-based care models, positions for Indigenous patient navigators, rural Indigenous community incentives for physicians and innovative solutions, such as child care support; and
- continuing working with nurses, physicians and other community partners to recruit and retain more health-care workers through the HHR Strategy.

Other provincial actions:

- There are currently 6,113 physicians and nurses registered with the Emergency Health Provider Registry, which is an online registry launched in 2017 to support the proactive and voluntary deployment of health-sector workers to communities across B.C. during emergency events including wildfires, floods and pandemics.
- There are also 134 physicians registered with the provincial emergency department locum pool launched in September 2023 to help keep community emergency departments open.

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