



National Association  
of Federal Retirees

Association nationale  
des retraités fédéraux

8 September 2021

To the Ontario Health Minister, the Hon. Christine Elliot

To the Ontario Association of Optometrists and the optometrists who voted to withdraw OHIP insured services starting September 1, 2021.

We are writing to you to express our grave concerns regarding the deadlock in negotiations between the Ontario government and the Ontario Association of Optometrists, as well as the resulting inability of Ontarians 65 years and older to obtain routine vision care services since September 1, 2021.

The National Association of Federal Retirees represents approximately 170,000 retired members of the federal public service, as well as veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and the RCMP, and their dependents and survivors. In Ontario, our organization has 60,000 members. Federal Retirees has been advocating for the financial security, health and well-being of our members and all Canadians for nearly 60 years.

Our organization has followed negotiations between the Ontario Association of Optometrists (OAO) and Ontario's Ministry of Health, and specifically the request to increase cost re-imbursing for optometric services for people over 65 years of age, as well for youths and other vulnerable residents. Many of our members have also contacted us with questions about the status of negotiations and to share the significant negative impact this issue will have on their vision and overall health.

The cancellation of appointments for our members and the lack of clarity as to when they will be able to receive optometric services is concerning and frustrating for Federal Retirees. Many members are in a vulnerable age group when vision may be declining and maintaining scheduled medical appointments is critical to maintaining good health and a sense of well-being. In addition, many of our members are also grandparents to youths under the age of 20 and understand the need of youths to visit an optometrist for eye exams and obtain relevant visual aids to ensure good vision at the start of an academic year.

The National Association of Federal Retirees believes the Government of Ontario should appropriately fund OHIP services for eye care so that optometrists are fairly reimbursed for OHIP-insured optometry services. Addressing the gap between the present re-imbursing rates and the real price of these services is long overdue.

Conversely, we also find it unacceptable for the Ontario Association of Optometrists to use as negotiation tactics the cancellation of appointments and denial of services to vulnerable individuals. A

lack of optometric services to populations covered by this aspect of OHIP could potentially compromise their vision and lead to other unexpected health problems.

To mitigate the effect this political tactic will have on the targeted groups, the OAO stated that they will still take on emergency cases and redirect patients experiencing a potential crisis to emergency rooms, or to a referral, to make sure they get proper treatment. Redirecting children and seniors with non-urgent needs to emergency rooms in normal times is at best a questionable tactic considering the social and financial costs, and the negative impacts emergency room congestion can have on people in life and death situations.

While the OAO may feel that they are out of options to get better alignment between the real cost of eye examinations and OHIP reimbursement rates, alternative means of political pressure exist to achieve goals that exclude refusing to provide care to youths and seniors. Optometrists are health care professionals, and with this comes responsibilities and ethics, including the Canadian Association of Optometrists' Code of Ethics.

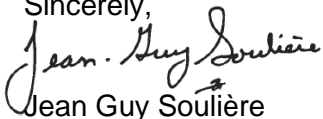
This issue highlights the importance of ensuring our health care system is comprehensive and universal, and that the *Canada Health Act* is upheld. The lack of coverage for medically necessary services, such as vision, dental, and Pharmacare, is an issue that must also be addressed by federal, provincial, and territorial governments.

The withdrawal of services by the OAO and the Ontario government's lack of clarity as to when it will begin to negotiate fairly is going to harm vulnerable youth and older adults, but particularly individuals who rely on OHIP for essential health care coverage. We understand that the Government of Ontario has offered \$39 million in retroactive payments. The government must also commit to addressing fee increases for the future and must commit to holding future negotiations.

It is time for both the Government of Ontario and the Ontario Association of Optometrists to immediately find a solution to the above-mentioned issues so that vulnerable seniors, children and other individuals are not left to pay the price with delayed exams and the likelihood that these individuals risk vision deterioration as a result of a lack of proper care.

We would like to conclude this letter by requesting regular updates about the status of negotiations and replies to our queries so that we may better inform our members and take appropriate actions and adopt measures in response to any withdrawal of legally sanctioned services to our members.

Sincerely,



Jean Guy Soulière

President

National Association of Federal Retirees