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**For Information**

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**REPORT TITLE: Healthy Babies Healthy Children Funding - Supporting Peel's Vulnerable Families**

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**OBJECTIVE**

To provide an update on the remobilization status of the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program for at-risk families with young children.

**REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

- Health Babies Healthy Children (HBHC) is a 100 per cent provincially funded program whose goal is optimizing the growth and development of newborns and young children while reducing health inequities for families.
  - Its \$6.9M budget has been frozen since 2008 with no inflationary increase, resulting in a growing level of underfunding.
  - When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, more than 80 per cent of the HBHC workforce was redeployed, and a brief virtual version of the program was implemented.
  - By the end of February 2023, HBHC had restarted its home visiting program, but as one of the regions hardest hit by COVID-19, Peel's HBHC is among the last to fully recover.
  - Peel is implementing a plan to return HBHC to meet Peel's needs, achieve its service-level commitments, and to communicate its progress to our funder throughout the year.
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**DISCUSSION**

**1. Background**

HBHC is a health promotion program focused on the prevention of illness and lifelong disadvantage, beginning in the earliest years of life. Specifically, HBHC is a voluntary, intensive home visiting program for at-risk families, which Ontario public health units are mandated to deliver, in collaboration with local hospitals and community agencies. HBHC's goal is to optimize the growth and development of newborns and young children (0-6 years old), as well as reduce health inequities for families. Families are screened at hospitals at the time of birth, and if identified with risk factors, they may voluntarily enter the program. After joining the program, families work with HBHC staff to make goals meaningful to them and the wellbeing of their children, such as parent-child attachment, positive parenting, breastfeeding and nutrition, and mental wellbeing.

## Healthy Babies Healthy Children Funding - Supporting Peel's Vulnerable Families

HBHC is funded by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS). Its budget is \$6.9M with no inflationary increase since 2008, resulting in chronic underfunding (25 per cent fewer Peel frontline staff now than in 2008).

### 2. Current Status

#### a) Pandemic's Impact on the HBHC program

Since Peel was hit so hard by COVID-19, more than 80 per cent of the HBHC workforce was redeployed to the pandemic response from 2020 to 2022. During those years, HBHC was only capable of offering families a brief, virtual version of the program.

In late 2022, staff began returning to HBHC, but first they required recovery, and then extensive training and recertification in provincially mandated HBHC skills. With this accomplished, HBHC re-started home visiting in March 2023, making it among the last public health units to remobilize its home visiting program.

#### b) HBHC's Home Visiting Remobilization Plan

To place HBHC on track to meeting the needs of the community:

- Fully retrained staff are visiting families in their homes and supporting their goals.
- HBHC is working with hospital partners to ensure screenings are completed for every family and the HBHC program is being promoted to at-risk families.
- HBHC is engaging with community agencies and local healthcare providers to refer families to the program.
- HBHC is conducting ongoing staff recruitment to manage staff attrition, to maximize service levels and to maintain staffing to funded levels.
- HBHC management is monitoring service-delivery metrics.

#### c) Request from MCCSS

In February 2023, MCCSS wrote to request details on Peel's plan to return to home visiting and its forecasted service volumes for the new fiscal year (Apr. 2023 – Mar. 2024). In response, Peel provided quarterly milestones and an annual commitment for these key metrics:

- number of screening tools received from community partners (e.g., hospitals and healthcare providers).
- our staff's volume of in-depth assessments, families served, and home visits completed.

These metrics will be shared with MCCSS as part of HBHC's regular reporting schedule.

### RISK CONSIDERATIONS

With every week that passes, Peel is building its service levels. By year-end, HBHC will be on track to meet its service commitments to MCCSS.

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It is important to note HBHC is reliant on two groups to function effectively:

- Hospitals, family physicians, midwives, and community agencies not only complete screening tools, but promote and refer clients to the HBHC program. Knowing these partners are overloaded, Peel will work collaboratively with them to support their efforts.
- HBHC requires competent and well-trained staff, yet there is a nursing shortage. Already in 2023 there has been significant turnover. Therefore, ongoing staff recruitment is underway to ensure we meet our service commitments and the needs of families.

### FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

HBHC is a 100 per cent funded program according to the MCCSS. However, its \$6.9M budget has been frozen since 2008 with no inflationary increase, resulting in a growing level of underfunding (25 per cent fewer staff now than 2008). To stay within budget while inflation increases, Peel anticipates its staffing complement will need to be reduced in 2024 resulting in reduced service levels.

### CONCLUSION

Peel Public Health is remobilizing HBHC and will meet our service-level commitments. For those families we are able to reach this year, there will be both short- and long-term health benefits for them. Nevertheless, we expect future service delivery challenges as HBHCs chronic underfunding continues.



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Nancy Polsinelli, Commissioner of Health Services

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