

Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario

Supplemental Report: Shortage of Lab Professionals Continues Post-Pandemic (July 2023)

Medical laboratory professionals were the backbone of the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has been declared over, but the shortage of Medical Laboratory Technologists (MLT) rages on. As surgeries ramp up and Ontarians return to visiting their physicians and lab testing increases, Ontario laboratories continue to struggle. Lab professionals are experiencing severe burnout as the number of lab tests continues to climb and the number of lab professionals diminishes.

The MLPAO conducted a survey in Spring 2023 to assess the current staffing challenges facing Ontario labs. Currently, 39% of MLTs in Ontario are approaching retirement¹. Labs across Ontario, especially in rural and remote communities struggle recruit MLTs to fill their vacant positions. According to the CDC, 70% of medical decisions rely on laboratory results. Medical laboratory professionals impact all aspects of patient care, from emergency rooms to family medicine to mental health. Action is needed now.

Overview:

- 58% stated shortages are affecting testing turnaround times
- 74% of job openings are unfilled for longer than 3 months
- 72% of vacancies are MLT vacancies (increase from 68% in 2022)
- 82% of the openings in remote areas are MLT vacancies
- 76% of rural and remote labs have unfilled vacancies for more than 3 months
- 311 open MLT positions down from 401 in 2022 (fewer labs responded to 2023 survey than the 2022 survey)

MLPAO's Call to Action must be addressed immediately.

- The critical shortage of Medical Laboratory Technologists in the province of Ontario continues. The supply cannot meet the demand of vacant positions. The number of new MLT graduates who register with the CMLTO is approximately 200 per year.¹ Programs vary from 3-4 years in length.² There is a waitlist at each MLT program.² The

¹ [CMLTO 2022 Annual Report](#).

² [Research Initiative: Clinical Placements and the Shortage of MLTs](#)

need for 311 MLTs equates to at least two full completed MLTs programs which would take 6 to 8 years.

- The shortage of 311 MLTs means that 13.6M lab tests are NOT being performed. The Call to Action proposed by the MLPAO³ provides a comprehensive plan that can address this issue mid to long term.
- ***The inclusion in the Learn and Stay Grant is a good start to address this problem, but the lack of clinical placements at Community and Hospital labs is the still main bottleneck.***

Survey Response

42% (91/217) of Ontario labs responded to the survey

- 55% from rural and remote labs, 26% from mid-sized urban centres, and 19% from large urban centres

General Medical Laboratory Technologist Scarcity

General Medical Laboratory Technologists account for 72% of total openings (311)

- The other 28% were divided among leadership (11) and MLA/T (110).

24% of all MLT openings are in Rural or Remote areas

- The other 76% were in Large Urban Centres (152), Mid-Sized Urban Centres (83).
- Unfilled MLT positions represent 74% of the total openings in rural areas and 82% of the openings in remote areas.
- Of the 50 remote and rural centre labs that answered the survey, 76% had job postings that had been open for 3 months or more.

Lab Professionals by Location

	Remote	Rural Centre	Mid-Sized Urban	Large Urban	Total
Total Unfilled Lab Positions	11	91	115	215	432
Total Unfilled MLT positions	9	67	83	152	311

³ [Call to Action: Investing in Lab Health Human Resources](#)

Total Lab Employees:

Total Lab Positions	Lab Management	MLTs	MLA/Ts	Total	Percentage of Positions Open	Percentage of MLT Positions Open
Remote	7	47	32	86	13%	10%
Rural	37	375	287	699	13%	10%
Mid-size Urban	67	843	712	1622	7%	5%
Large Urban	106	2090	1285	3491	6%	4%
Total All	217	3355	2316	5888	7%	6%

- In addition, 34% of Lab Management are 55+ and 18% of MLTs are 55+ in the workplaces surveyed.

Medical Laboratory Positions Remain Empty – Open 3+ Months

92% of workplaces who responded to the survey had at least one opening.

- Of that 92%, **74% said that at least one of their openings has gone unfilled for at least 3 months.**

Lab Turnaround Time:

58% of labs responded that shortages were affecting or were somewhat affecting lab turnaround time.

- 42% said shortages were not affecting their turnaround times; however, several labs listed in the open comment that staff work more hours or use overtime to make their testing times; sick calls and LOA are affecting turnaround times; and that staff are stretched to capacity.

Barriers to taking Clinical Placement Students

88% of labs stated they experience barriers to taking clinical placement students for the following reasons:

- 46% are unable to provide training in all 5 disciplines and 36% cited time as barriers
- Of the 88% of respondents who said they have barriers to taking clinical placement students, several used the open comment box to say they experience more than one barrier or identified other barriers like lack of space and insufficient numbers of students available for placement

The following MLT training programs were listed by labs as their primary source for MLTs

- Michener- 21%
- Cambrian College- 39%
- St. Clair- 14%
- Ontario Tech University- 9%
- St. Lawrence- 17%

Other Comments:

- Comments related to the challenges with recruiting students and MLTs to northern Ontario
- Suggestion for a truncated program for MLTs in northern Ontario hospitals that only have a core lab; this would allow them to train locally
- Dedicated funding to help organizations support students placements
- Use of stimulation to lessen the burden for placements in microbiology and histology
- Comment regarding the challenge to train MLAs/Ts with minimal staff
- Comments related to the challenges to recruit new grads; not enough new grads to replace the large proportion of staff who will be retiring in the next 3-4 years
- Provide incentives and saved seats at college MLT programs for rural applicants
- Comment regarding the need for additional seats in the Genetics MLT program
- As MLTs retire, their level of knowledge and expertise cannot be replaced by new MLTs; there will not be enough experienced leadership to support these young teams