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FORD GOVERNMENT CANCELS HEALTH-CARE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUND

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Ford government cancels health-care professional development fund

 29.01.2020  Jack Hauen  0

The **Doug Ford** government is axing a health-care professional development fund, which some say will cut off one of the few opportunities workers have for continuing education in their field.

Every year, the [Allied Health Professional Development Fund](#) provides grants each worth up to \$1,500 for professional development courses and programs for audiologists, dietitians, medical laboratory technologists, medical radiation technologists, occupational therapists, pharmacists, physiotherapists, respiratory therapists and speech-language pathologists.

"The government is taking a comprehensive approach to modernizing the public health care system with a focus on patient experience and better-connected care," reads a [letter](#) sent to

allied health workers on Monday from **Michael Hillmer**, the director of information management, data, and analytics in the Ministry of Health. "As part of this effort, health-care investments are being focused where they will have the most impact, on frontline care."

The fund will wrap up by March 2, the letter says. Applications sent before then will be "reviewed as normal."

Many health organizations affected by the cancellation have expressed their dismay.

Out of the program's \$4-million budget, physiotherapists are allocated \$500,000 – and they use every penny, said **Amanda Smart**, the director of practice, policy and member services at the Ontario Physiotherapy Association.

"The reaction from our members has been quite swift and many are starting to question their viability of actually pursuing ongoing education due to the loss of access to this really important resource," she said.

About 55,000 medical workers had access to the fund, said **Michelle Hoad**, the CEO of the Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario (MLPAO).

"It's not like we're talking about a small group of people," she said.

The fund's key priorities, set out by the government, are seniors' care, chronic disease prevention and inter-professional collaboration, Hoad said.

"Courses for these types of specialized skills are quite expensive and they require, in many cases, levels of training, and can be often prohibitive," Smart said. "So having access to this fund really did allow many of our members to develop into specialized skill areas that would've addressed a lot of the emerging needs of Ontarians."

Lots of other organizations have cut back on their own professional development funds due to financial pressures, Smart added.

"This fund really had been filling a gap," she said.

Hoad said the cancellation is a "punch in the gut," especially since 44 per cent of the 6,400-plus medical lab technologists in the MLPAO are eligible to retire in the next four to eight years.

"So we're now potentially looking at a group of MLTs who not only have to deal with shortages at the hospitals but now they're going to ... no longer get any funding for continuing education," she said.

The writing had been on the wall that the fund would be cut, said **Kevin Taylor**, the registrar of the College of Respiratory Therapists of Ontario.

"Everyone more or less expected it," he said.

Hoad said she had heard rumours that that may be the case, but nothing concrete until two days ago.

"It's surprising," she said.

Taylor said it wouldn't be a big loss for most respiratory therapists who work at hospitals, since continuing education is usually covered by their employers, but those in community settings could suffer.

The government has signalled an intent to find other ways to support continuing education for health-care workers.

"Going forward, the ministry will be working with its system partners (including professional associations) in allied health to identify the best ways to support the continuing education of the entire allied health workforce including the design of any future programs," Hillmer's letter reads.

Health Minister **Christine Elliott** spokesperson **Alexandra Hilkene** said the ministry will work with the Registered Practical Nurses Association of Ontario to wind down the program's administration.

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