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Sometimes, it seems as though the Town Council passes a motion to act on an issue, and then everyone forgets about it. Sometimes it's a surprise when, out of the blue, months or even years later, an announcement is made that a solution has been achieved.

In 2022, Council committed to advocating for the reinstatement of a nurse practitioner position that has been "in limbo" for several years. Last month, almost two years later, the Town announced "out of the blue" that the [Niagara North Family Health Team](#) has at last received the go-ahead to re-establish the position. Why did it take two years to get done?

I'm proud to have worked on this project, and it serves as a good example of how important issues are sometimes resolved: not in the Council chamber, or in municipal or regional offices, but by building alliances among diverse entities, by sharing knowledge, and by making best use of opportunities as they arise to get closer and closer to achieving the desired goal. Let me tell you the story behind the headlines.

The backstory starts with one of Niagara-on-the-Lake's three nurse practitioners being redeployed during the pandemic to help with Niagara's response to the emergency. While two of our nurse practitioners serve patients registered with our family doctors, this third nurse is responsible for providing primary health care on a walk-in basis to residents without a family doctor. As well, visitors and temporary residents are eligible, and the nurse can also visit residents requiring palliative care at home. Beyond standard nursing procedures, and within designated boundaries, a nurse practitioner can offer many services otherwise provided by a family doctor, such as writing prescriptions and referring patients to specialists.

At the end of the pandemic emergency, the nurse practitioner position wasn't redeployed back to NOTL. I discovered this omission early in 2022. At this time, the waiting list for a doctor in NOTL was longer than ever before. With 6,000 residents unable to register for a family doctor in 2022, the absence of this third position was causing stress for un-registered residents, and was also an additional strain on existing walk-in clinics and emergency rooms in the Niagara North area. By late 2023, prior to the appointment of two additional family doctors to the NOTL Family Health Team (FHT), there were a total of 8,000 residents without a doctor.

Before continuing the story, there's another bit of background I need to explain. The Town of NOTL annually levies a tax that's paid to [Niagara Health](#) (not to be confused with Niagara North FHT). However, although it raises the levy, the Council has no direct responsibility for community health provision. Its only means of furthering NOTL's health needs is by advocating for them with the relevant levels of government and the various organizations that have a role in delivering health services in NOTL.

In May 2022 I gave notice that I'd be tabling a [motion](#) at the June Council meeting requesting the Council to instigate an advocacy plan to have the nurse practitioner position returned to NOTL as soon as possible.

To my surprise and pleasure, [Niagara-on-the-Lake Community Palliative Care](#) picked up on my notice of the motion. Bonnie Bagnulo, Executive Director of the service contacted me and was able to provide essential background information about the position. She also gave invaluable assistance in bringing together the various parties that could shed light on the situation.

As a result, in mid-June 2022, Bonnie Bagnulo, Heather Peterson (Interim VP Clinical Services and Chief Nursing Executive, Niagara Health), Mary Keith (Executive Director, Niagara North FHT), Sally Berry (Nurse Practitioner), Lord Mayor Betty Disero and I met for an exchange of information and to review the situation. Importantly, we learned that the funding for the position was in place, but hadn't been activated. This informal meeting opened up vital lines of communication, making it possible to develop an advocacy plan as soon as Council had passed the motion at its June meeting.

The Council's approval provided the framework for pursuing the project, and I appreciated Lord Mayor Disero's support during the remainder of that Council term. I continued to advocate within the current Council, and early in 2023 I submitted a request to the Ontario Ministry of Health for an update.

Lord Mayor Zalepa and MPP Wayne Gates also brought their voices to the fore, and sent a joint letter to Ontario Health Minister Sylvia Jones in the Fall of 2023. MPP Gates subsequently raised the issue in Parliament's question time, doggedly pursuing his question despite Minister Jones's evasive answers. (see [November 2023 Newsletter](#) for more details). These actions raised the profile of NOTL's advocacy, and by January 2024 Minister Jones was open to receiving a presentation by the Town during the annual Rural Ontario Municipalities Association Conference. Lord Mayor Zalepa, Councillor Wiens and I made the most of this opportunity to press our case.

The final breakthrough came when I learned that Niagara Health was to receive \$2.1 million in funding this Spring for a wide range of specific needs, but our nurse practitioner was still not reinstated. I sent Lynn Guerriero (President and CEO of Niagara Health) an email describing our urgent request to have the practitioner position filled. Although I didn't hear back, I learned later that Lynn had followed up, and I was very pleased when I received an email from Mary Keith at Niagara North NHT informing me that the position

had been secured. Lord Mayor Zalepa and I attended a meeting with Mary and subsequently I sat on the recruitment team that led to Amy Bolduc's appointment to the reinstated position. Amy is now operating out of the Village Medical Centre on Garrison Village Drive and you can get more details [here](#).

I'm extremely grateful to everyone who helped bring back primary care for NOTLers who don't have access to our family doctors and their nurse practitioners. You can see how, from the time I became aware of the unfilled position right up to the final "push", we depended on the help of a very diverse but equally committed group of individuals. Within the context of their various positions, every one of them contributed to educating stakeholders, nudging doors open, and bringing a successful conclusion to the seemingly unattainable challenge of re-instating this vital position through advocacy alone.

I'd like to specifically thank the individuals mentioned above: Lord Mayor Zalepa and former Lord Mayor Disero, MPP Wayne Gates, Lynn Guerriero, Mary Keith, Bonnie Bagnulo and Sally Berry. From its instigation as a Council motion through to the "out of the blue" announcement of its success, this project will always serve to remind me that advocacy is a much stronger tool than it may seem. Our nurse practitioner is reinstated entirely because the many facets of government and public service worked side by side to achieve a tangible benefit for the people of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Thank you for your attention.

Sandra O'Connor  
Niagara-on-theLake Councillor

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