

# Annual Report 2024



North Bay Parry Sound District

**Health Unit**



**Bureau de santé**  
du district de North Bay-Parry Sound

## Land Acknowledgement

The North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit (Health Unit) operates on the traditional territory of Dokis First Nation, Henvey Inlet First Nation, Magnetawan First Nation, Nipissing First Nation, Shawanaga First Nation, and Wasauksing First Nation. The district also includes the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin people. These lands and waters have been under stewardship of Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial and continue to be home to diverse Indigenous communities, including First Nations, Inuit, and Metis from across Turtle Island and around the world. The Health Unit is also situated on land covered by the Robinson Huron Treaty, and the Williams Treaties.

# Table of Contents

Message from the Board Chair .....	4
Message from the Medical Officer of Health .....	6
Opening Doors to Better Oral Health in Parry Sound .....	8
IPAC Hubs .....	11
Pertussis Outbreak .....	13
Healthy Hands .....	14
Protecting Students from Disease .....	15
GetaKit .....	16
Home Commercial Kitchens .....	17
Growing Through Play .....	18
Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey .....	20
Advancing Child and Youth Well-being .....	22
Meeting Youth Where They're At .....	24
Student Exposure to Public Health .....	25
The Amazing Race .....	27
Maternal Child Update .....	28
Aging with Confidence .....	29
Health Equity Training Funds .....	30
Indigenous Engagement .....	31
Planting the Seeds for Community Climate Action .....	32
Doing More for Perinatal Mental Health .....	33
Quality Improvement .....	35
2024 Stats at a Glance .....	37
2024-2027 Strategic Plan .....	42
2024 Unaudited Expenditures .....	44

# Message from the Board Chair

On behalf of the Board of Health, thank you to the staff at the Health Unit for their ongoing commitment, care and collaborative efforts over the past year and beyond. Having served on the board for nearly 20 years since 1998, I have seen how important their work is to the communities we serve. I would also like to express the board's gratitude to Dr. Carol Zimbalatti, who in her first year as Medical Officer of Health has hit the ground running, setting the stage to ensure we are ready and able to take on the public health needs facing our communities today and into the future.

Much of this work was informed by you – clients, community members, community partners and Health Unit staff. Highlighted in this report, the 2024-2027 Strategic Plan is based on your perspectives. It renews our vision, mission and values, seeks to improve the well-being of our organization, address the needs of the population we serve and enhance the relationships we hold. The board thanks everyone who was part of this process and is looking forward to seeing the outcomes over the next few years as we work together toward a healthy community for all.

This year raised some uncertainty about the future, as we and other health units were encouraged to explore merger possibilities with the intention of strengthening Ontario's public health sector. Although this did not result in our organization merging, it was insightful to have genuine, in-depth discussions with our neighbouring counterparts about how we can better serve our respective communities. We were reminded that the delivery



of public health services is impacted by the vast and rural nature of our districts; the diverse and complex populations we serve; the great number of municipalities in our region, and the many impactful community partnerships we have built. As such, the Board of Health continued advocacy efforts throughout 2024 to ensure the northern public health voice was heard amid the ongoing provincial funding review, and emphasized the need for equitable funding across Ontario's health unit regions that will account for northern Ontario's unique context.

A milestone the Board of Health is particularly proud of is the relocation of the Parry Sound branch office. Now conveniently located at 90 Bowes St., opening this bright, modern space allows us to bring pivotal oral health care to children, adults and seniors in the Parry Sound area who may not have had the opportunity to receive it otherwise. It is a testament to the Health Unit's commitment to offering equitable health services across the region.

Warm Regards,



Rick Champagne  
**CHAIRPERSON, BOARD OF HEALTH**

## Board Member List

### Nipissing District

#### **Central appointees**

Karen Cook

Sara Inch

Jamie Lowery,  
Board of Health  
Vice-Chairperson

Maurice Switzer

Dave Wolfe

#### **Eastern appointee**

Rick Champagne,  
Board of Health Chairperson

#### **Western appointee**

Jamie Restoule

### Parry Sound District

#### **Northeast appointee**

Blair Flowers

#### **Western appointee**

Jamie McGarvey

#### **Southeast appointee**

Marianne Stickland

#### **Provincial appointees**

Tim Sheppard

Catherine Still

# Message from the Medical Officer of Health

The year was filled with opportunities to discuss, listen and reflect. First, with neighbouring health units through potential merger discussions; then, with clients, staff, partners and community members in the development of our 2024-2027 strategic plan. These conversations provided me with a rich understanding of where we are, what matters most to the people we serve, and in which direction we need to head to meet our communities' emerging public health needs efficiently and effectively. While exploring change was a common theme in 2024, I commend our staff for engaging in the many intensive processes that came along with this, while still delivering on core work.

As I reflect on the year, I am full of gratitude for our dedicated community partners who have worked with our passionate staff in ways big and small to build a healthy community for all. With only a one percent annual budget increase to Ontario's health units introduced this year, we will need to continue to be proactive and adaptable to emerging threats to population health, while at the same



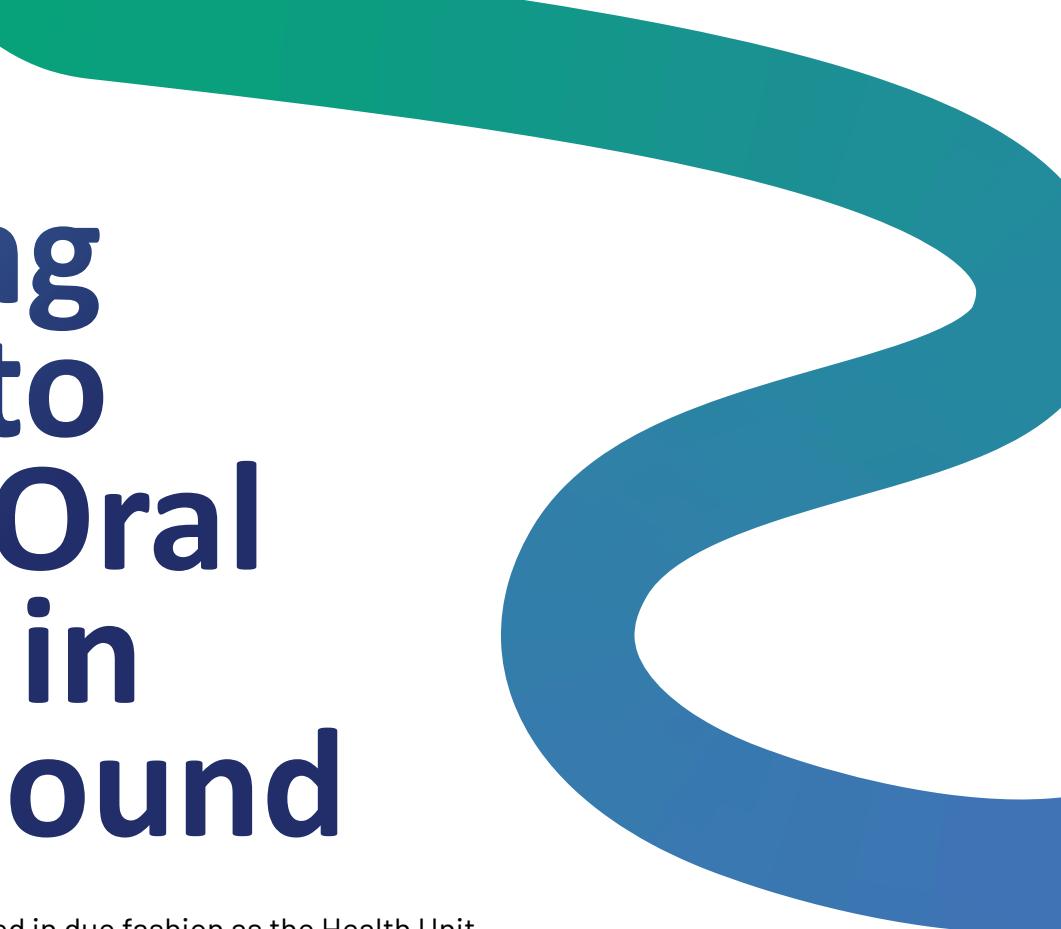
time recognizing that complex issues will require united, community-wide efforts. In 2024, I have seen deep engagement between the Health Unit and community partners, and I have full confidence that in the years ahead we will come together like never before to improve the conditions that contribute to the overall health and well-being of people in the Nipissing and Parry Sound districts.

I am proud to bring back the annual report, as it brings awareness to the scope of work we do in public health and illustrates a resilient return to programming after an organization-wide pandemic response. I hope you enjoy these stories as much as I do, and that you will join us in shaping the stories still to come.



Dr. Carol Zimbalatti, CCFP, MPH  
**MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH/EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

# Opening Doors to Better Oral Health in Parry Sound



Public Health Week was celebrated in due fashion as the Health Unit welcomed community partners to celebrate the opening of the new Parry Sound Office. The 8,827 square-foot professional space features a modern administrative vicinity, and bright and spacious client areas, including a private room for breastfeeding families, and areas for sexual health appointments, vaccinations, and harm reduction supplies.

Expanding the range of services offered at the former Parry Sound location, the new space also provides a fully functional dental clinic to support eligible children, adults, and seniors. Since its opening, clients who have used the dental clinic have expressed immense gratitude for both the much-needed local access and quality of care:

*"I cannot express to the degree of importance having this clinic available means to me. The care, time taken, thoroughness of a non-rushed examination gives me confidence for a positive long term health results. The treatment and respect received is much appreciated," says one.*

The Health Unit's dental clinics in Parry Sound and North Bay offer services for children up to age 17 who are registered under the Healthy Smiles Ontario (HSO) program. These services include teeth cleaning, check-ups, dental

treatment, and urgent or emergency oral health concerns. The Health Unit provides the same care to people aged 65 and older who qualify for the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program (OSDCP) with the addition of referrals for dentures.

In addition, the clinics provide an outlet for individuals aged 18 years and older who meet specific eligibility requirements. The Health Unit accepts Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), Ontario Works (OW), and Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) for First Nations and Inuit individuals.

"We are lucky to have the ability to make a positive difference in the health and well-being of our clients," says Julie Patenaude-Bouffard, Acting Manager of the Oral Health program at the Health Unit. "Previously, we would have to send clients from the Parry Sound district to North Bay for critical dental care, and now we can offer them quality care closer to home."

Rebecca Hill, Certified Dental Assistant, shows off the main client area of the Health Unit's dental clinic in Parry Sound.



The bright, spacious and welcoming lobby of the Health Unit's Parry Sound location

L-R: James King, Constituency Assistant for MPP Graydon Smith; Mayor Jamie McGarvey of the Town of Parry Sound; Dr. Carol Zimbalatti, Medical Officer of Health, and Rick Champagne, Board of Health Chairperson, cut the ribbon to commence the opening of the new Health Unit office in Parry Sound.



The Health Unit is pleased to share some heart-warming comments from clients about what accessing care at the Parry Sound dental clinic has meant to them:

“

This means EVERYTHING. It has been 30 years since I have had dental done and I am so grateful for the senior's program.

“

I feel very happy to be able to smile now after having my cleaning, I feel confident again. It meant so much to be treated respectfully and I was not rushed. I felt the time that was taken to explain and teach new things by the hygienist was great. She was caring, gentle and kind.

“

It has meant everything because without your service I wouldn't be able to afford dental care on my own.

“

Staff are very personable and make me feel at ease, they are also attentive to my issues with dentists.

“

It's like winning the lottery.

“

Very thankful that I have this. I have difficulty swallowing and I need help to keep teeth to be able to eat so this means everything to me and with the possibility of getting dentures, it will help with my self- esteem and able to really smile again.

“

My daughter had a ton of anxiety, and the hygienist was unbelievably accommodating. I can't thank you enough.

“

I cannot express to the degree of importance having this clinic available means to me. The care, time taken, thoroughness of a non-rushed examination gives me confidence for a positive long term health results. The treatment and respect received is much appreciated.

When the Parry Sound dental clinic first opened its doors, one grateful client brought staff tomato plants as a thank-you gift and shared, "This changed my life."

# IPAC Hubs



The Health Unit's Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) Hub is one of 31 localized teams across Ontario who work toward enhancing infection prevention and control measures in group living settings. This involves working closely with the settings' staff to build customized practices, offer guidance, and facilitate opportunities for networking, training and education.

In 2024, the Health Unit's IPAC Hub responded to 1,390 requests for support across 28 group living settings, including:

- **Long-term care homes**
- **Retirement homes**
- **Emergency shelters, including shelters for survivors of gender-based violence**
- **Homes for adults with developmental disabilities**
- **Supportive housing for individuals experiencing complex mental health and addictions**
- **Youth justice licensed facilities**
- **Indigenous health and wellness strategy residential programs**

The IPAC Hub also did 14 assessments of long-term care homes and retirement homes to assess IPAC practices, such as:

- **Measures to prevent and prepare for outbreaks**
- **Signs and notices**
- **Visitor policies**
- **Vaccination policies**
- **Hand hygiene**

- **Cleaning and disinfection**
- **Personal protective equipment**
- **Ventilation**
- **Construction and renovation projects**

IPAC Hubs were initiated by the Ontario Ministry of Health in Fall 2020 in response to the impact of COVID-19 on congregate living settings. Since its inception, the Health Unit's IPAC Hub has helped to safeguard the health and well-being of some of our region's most vulnerable populations. The Hub has also established ongoing collaboration with the broader health system, to ensure that infection prevention and control practices remain strong, effective, and sustainable well into the future.

# Pertussis Outbreak

## *Whooping cough*

On May 29, the Health Unit declared a pertussis outbreak in the Municipality of West Nipissing. Within a week, the outbreak had expanded throughout the broader Health Unit region. To help slow the spread, the Health Unit garnered the support of primary health care providers, facilitated vaccination clinics in the most high-risk areas, and issued reminders to the public to ensure their pertussis vaccinations were up-to-date. The outbreak concluded with a total of 38 cases reported between May 29 and October 17, including two hospitalizations and one death.

On average, the Health Unit reports about 3.8 cases of pertussis per year.

# Healthy Hands

Did you know teaching children to wash their hands can reduce stomach illnesses like diarrhea by about 30%? Or that 80% of common illness and infections are spread by hands?

While children are taught the basics of hand washing early on in life, frequent reminders help them develop strong life-long habits that maintain good health.

To encourage children to wash their hands, the Health Unit partnered with third-year nursing students at Nipissing University and Canadore College. Together, they offered handwashing lessons to elementary school students and children in childcare centres from January to April, and again from September to November. The lessons focused on helping children understand when, how, and why to wash their hands to prevent illness.

In total, 798 children from eight schools and four childcare centres learned about germs, how they are spread, and how to protect themselves and others through proper handwashing.

This partnership demonstrates the Health Unit's mission to foster healthy communities through partnership, preparedness, prevention, promotion, and protection, and represents another step toward realizing the vision of a healthy community for all.



# Protecting Students from Disease



During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Health Unit services that are offered within the school system came to a halt. As a result, families and students faced challenges accessing vaccine services, leading to a drop in school vaccination coverage rates by as much as 10%. These lower vaccination rates increased the likelihood that schools would experience outbreaks related to meningitis, whooping cough, measles, and other vaccine preventable diseases.

In the 2023/2024 school year, the Health Unit resumed its full school-based vaccine services, holding 99 clinics and ensuring that over 93% of school students received all required vaccines. In total, 16,811 student vaccination records were reviewed and brought up to date and follow-up took place with 2,443 students whose vaccine records were outdated. This provincial requirement is an important process that supports a healthy learning environment and optimal student well-being by reducing the burden of illness in schools.

According to Public Health Ontario, the vaccination rates in the Health Unit region have now returned to pre-pandemic rates, with a coverage rate of over 80% for all required vaccine antigens. This is among the highest rates in the province, exceeding the provincial average. This highlights the importance of the Immunization of School Pupils Act, 1990 in achieving high immunization rates to minimize the risks of disease outbreaks in schools and communities.

# GetaKit

Bringing GetaKit to the Nipissing and Parry Sound districts marked a new partnership between the Health Unit and the University of Ottawa, working to break down barriers to accessing care for HIV and sexually transmitted infections.

Individuals who participate in the GetaKit program receive kits with the proper tools and instructions to test themselves for sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections. They can order their kit online and have it mailed to their address, and if eligible, access confidential testing recommendations tailored to their needs without having to book an appointment. Knowing not everyone has a fixed address or the ability to order online, the Health Unit has made it possible for people to sign up for and pick up their kit at the Health Unit.

"What's great about GetaKit is not only does it allow more people the opportunity to get tested, but it goes one step further and links these people to places that can support them with their result, be it through medicine to prevent HIV, treatment services, or whatever is most relevant to them," says Julie Pabillar, Manager of the Sexual Health program at the Health Unit.

The GetaKit service is offered as part of a study by the University of Ottawa, who is conducting research on how many people use these tests, their test results, and whether people who test positive get connected to professional care.

In 2024, 136 testing orders were placed throughout the Health Unit region, 74% of which belonged to a priority population for general sexually-transmitted blood-borne infection screening, 39% of which were part of a priority population for HIV screening, and 23% of which represented someone using this service to access testing for the first time.

# Home Commercial Kitchens

The Health Unit's public health inspectors are making themselves at home when it comes to commercial kitchen inspections. In 2024, the government of Ontario empowered homeowners to operate food premises from their home kitchen, providing an accessible entry point into the food industry. This sector of home-based businesses has grown significantly across the Health Unit region, becoming one of the fastest-growing types of food businesses.

There were 23 new home-based businesses registered in 2024, a 17% increase from 2023. By the end of 2024, the Health Unit was working with 73 registered businesses, helping them to meet high food safety standards at home. While this growth does present some challenges, inspectors work closely with the business owners to help them interpret the new provincial regulations and retrofit their home kitchens when necessary.

# Growing Through Play

The Health Unit offers the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program to families across the region who need extra support helping their child to achieve positive developmental outcomes. It involves a public health nurse and family home visitor meeting new and expecting parents where they are at, and working as a team to build strengths within the family unit and ensure the child has access to the community resources they need to develop and thrive. The service is free and voluntary for families to participate in after consulting a public health nurse, and families can also be referred to the program by other organizations. The following story of Rachel and Justin is based on actual events in 2024, and illustrates a typical experience for families who develop positive parenting practices through participating in the program.

Rachel and Justin live together with their three children: a baby, a preschooler, and one in public school. At home, Rachel tends to be the main caregiver, doing her best to look after the little ones while Justin spends his time playing video games and paying little attention to the family and household needs. With Rachel having social anxiety and a history of depression, the family spent most of their time in the house, which had become cluttered with little to no space for play. Being in this environment fostered challenging behaviours among the children and a great deal of frustration for Rachel and Justin. Despite their frustrations, the couple had been resistant to new ideas and information that could transform their family's interactions.

After getting to know the parents and children, the public health nurse and family home visitor knew they would need a creative approach to help the parents realize their family's potential. They asked themselves, "how do we create space for the children to play and develop, and how do we motivate

the parents to want good developmental outcomes for their children?" Their answer was to focus on building small successes, and work toward experiential learning through demonstration, role modeling and coaching.

Their next visits with the family took place outdoors in a shared green space near Rachel and Justin's home.

The children were engaged in inexpensive games such as hopscotch, scavenger hunting, or picking flowers. The goal was to expand the play environment and show that parenting is easier when children are happy. Rachel and Justin were not convinced at first, but after a few visits, they started bringing their own lawn chairs to sit in.

With time, the couple shared they had been going outside as a family during the week. Eventually the outdoor play expanded to the local park, where the children were exposed to a larger environment and other children to interact with. The parents were able to see that the children were happier when they were able to get outside and play and there appeared to be a shared sense of joy. The public health nurse and family home visitor continued reinforcing positive family interactions, building problem-solving skills, and supporting new ideas from the parents.

In 2024, the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program in Nipissing-Parry Sound received an additional \$74,500 in provincial funding. More than 450 families were referred to the Health Unit's program.

*Names in this story have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.*



# Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey

In the 2022/2023 school year, the Health Unit was involved in an oversample of the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. This oversample included 14 elementary schools (361 students across grades seven and eight) and 6 secondary schools (374 students in grades 9 to 12) in the Health Unit region.

The dataset was released in 2024, and the Health Unit used it to identify patterns and trends related to student drug use, mental health and overall well-being, and how health behaviours vary across different student demographics. The data is also being used to help educators, policy-makers, and health professionals in the Health Unit region make informed decisions about student health and well-being programs.

## Highlights from the data revealed:

- 57% of students in the region reported feeling connected to their school (responded “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” to feeling safe in their school, close to people at the school and feeling like they are a part of the school).

- 64.3% of locally surveyed students reported having been bullied at least once a month or more since the beginning of the school year.
- 48.3% of students met the criteria for moderate-to-serious psychological distress in the last month (at time of survey), with female students being 1.8 times more likely to meet these criteria compared to males (63.3% versus 34.5%, respectively).
- Students from the region were significantly more likely than Ontario students to report trying electronic cigarettes (vaping), alcohol, and tobacco cigarettes in their lifetime (36%, 64.2%, 15% locally versus 25%, 52.5%, 9% provincially).



# Advancing Child and Youth Well-being

Focusing on child and youth well-being is essential to public health, as early experiences affect how the brain and body develop and influence learning, behaviour, and lifelong health (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.).

Recognizing this, the Health Unit is working collaboratively with community partners to create environments that support healthy development and resilience among children and youth. Under the Muskoka, Nipissing, and Parry Sound Child and Youth Planning Table (CYPT), four action-oriented groups, representing 37 organizations, are advancing four key priorities to improve child and youth well-being:

## **Adverse Childhood Experiences and Resilience Working Group:**

Raising awareness among service providers and community leaders about how childhood experiences shape health, and how supportive relationships and environments build resilience.

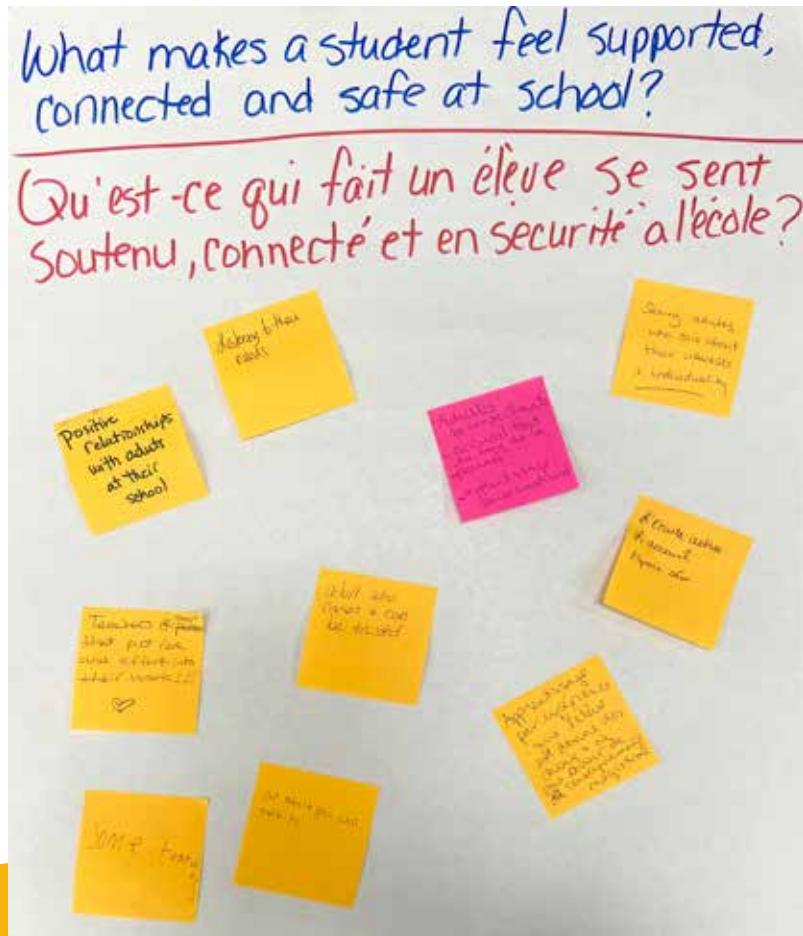
**Planet Youth Nipissing:** Using data and collaboration, address the root causes of early substance use by strengthening protective factors such as positive relationships with family and friends, involvement in extracurricular activities, and school engagement.



**Positive Parenting Strategy Group:** Coming together to identify emerging issues affecting parents and caregivers of children in our region. A community-wide action plan is under development aimed at helping families manage stress, build knowledge, skills and confidence related to parenting, and increase access to supportive resources.

**CYPT Data Framework:** Working with the Muskoka, Nipissing, and Parry Sound Data Collaborative and the CYPT to develop a **series of digital dashboards** reflective of community-well-being factors. The first in the dashboard series displays data on income, housing, food, and employment security, guiding interventions to improve health equity.

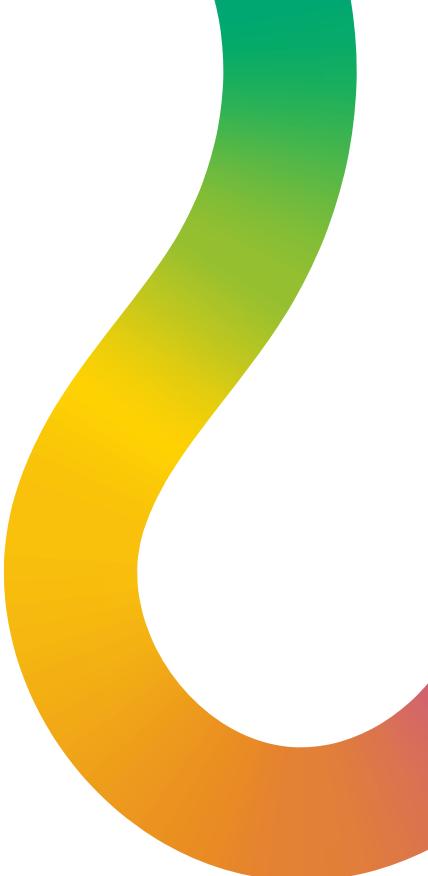
These collective efforts strengthen the capacity of our communities to address mental health and substance use challenges, reduce risks, and foster community resilience, laying the foundation for a future of healthier individuals, families and communities.



# Meeting Youth Where They're At

Public health nurses from the Health Unit celebrated the first full calendar year of offering pre-pandemic level of services to secondary school students. They were able to facilitate 581 interactions in schools, with a vast majority of students attending on a drop-in basis. The most common services were condom pickups, birth control counselling, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection testing, along with provision of sexual health information. Partnering with the designated secondary schools to reintegrate these important sexual health services is another example of the Health Unit delivering on equitable access to health services, and collaborating to foster better health and well-being outcomes for youth.

# Student Exposure to Public Health



The Health Unit had the privilege of supporting 40 Nipissing University students in completing their placement during their third year of study in the BScN Nursing program, as well as 12 one-to-one student placements from disciplines including social work, education, administration, nursing and dietetics. Throughout the year, students contributed to handwashing education campaigns in schools and childcare centres, an evaluation of the GetaKit program, and a research initiative aimed at reducing the environmental footprint of the oral health clinics.

From the latter, it was recommended the Health Unit's dental clinic invest in a distilled water unit at a one-time cost of \$1,200. This investment would result in significant reductions to plastic, cost and physical labour. Students found that the Health Unit's dental clinic in North Bay had been spending \$1,050 – \$2,100 per year to receive monthly shipments of more than 30 plastic bottles of distilled water each month. Oral Health staff would then be required to unpack, load and recycle the bottles, taking time away from providing important client care. By purchasing the distilled water unit, the North Bay dental clinic now saves up to 768 four-litre bottles a year in plastic waste, saves at least \$87.51 per month, and is able to give more time back to clients.

"Student placements play an integral role in building a capable and dedicated public health workforce and in advancing our Health Unit's vision," says Terry Smith, Professional Practice Manager. "We deeply value the energy and expertise the students bring to our programs and are committed to supporting their professional growth."

Julie Patenaude-Bouffard, Acting Manager of the Health Unit's Oral Health program, adds, "The students' research was effective and greatly appreciated. We wish them the best as they continue to pursue rewarding careers, and look forward to continuing our partnerships with post-secondary institutions."



# The Amazing Race

It's become tradition for first-year Nipissing University students to drop by the Health Unit on their route for The Amazing Race, a component of the school's annual student orientation week. The Health Unit's 2024 Amazing Race segment was another success, with about 230 students participating in safe needle pick-up and disposal, navigating the effects of alcohol on mobility, and testing their knowledge on safer sex practices before hurrying to their next destination. Students left with items representative of the diverse Health Unit programs, including a recipe card for easy, affordable and nutritious meals; magnets with a guideline of safe internal cooking temperatures; a toothbrush, condoms, and much more.



# Maternal Child Update

On October 2, approximately 200 healthcare providers attended the 2024 Maternal Child Update online or in-person at the North Bay Regional Health Centre. The education day focused on breastfeeding, perinatal mental health, and the significance of early relational health. Dr. Carol Zimbalatti, Medical Officer of Health, opened the day with a presentation on the importance of providing safe, stable nurturing relationships in early childhood. Attendees expressed their appreciation for the event, agreeing it was informative and beneficial to their work.

# Aging with Confidence

More than 500 older adults across the Health Unit region were connected directly to social clubs, social and medical services, municipal resources and much more at the 2024 Aging with Confidence Symposium.

Held throughout June in North Bay, Parry Sound and Sturgeon Falls, the event featured around 26 organizations whose services help to maintain the independence, health and well-being of individuals as they grow older. The event also worked to foster social connections, bringing attendees together over a nutritious lunch.

The Health Unit's Stay on Your Feet representatives continue to support organizations in the Nipissing and Parry Sound districts who are interested in promoting the ways older adults can be active, social, and participating members of their communities.



# Health Equity Training Funds

Every day, health and social service agencies work hard to offer essential and meaningful services to people who are greatly impacted by systemic inequities. Recognizing the challenging and ever-evolving nature of this work, the Health Unit provided funding to 29 non-profit, charitable and/or government funded agencies across the region to help cover professional development opportunities related to health equity. These agencies chose where and how to apply these funds, acting on areas such as homelessness, mental health, trauma-informed care, 2SLGBTQ+ positive spaces, decolonization and Indigenous cultural awareness. In seeking knowledge and skill building in these areas, staff and volunteers of these organizations are recognizing how important it is to understand the populations we serve as health and social service providers, and how to work from a place of respect towards more inclusive and equitable communities.

# Indigenous Engagement

Moving forward on its commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 91 Calls to Action, the Health Unit got to work on retrofitting their North Bay office to include an indoor and outdoor smudging space. With the goal of providing anti-racist, culturally safe practices and to establish trusting relationships with Indigenous partners, members of the Health Unit's Indigenous Wellness Circle advocated for these new additions and were consulted throughout the process. They will continue to be part of the conversation as the layout of the room is updated in 2025. Upon completion, these spaces will be made available for community groups to use for ceremonies, meetings and other gatherings as appropriate. While a smudging space at the Health Unit's Parry Sound facility is not yet a possibility, alternative options such as a sage candle lighting are being explored.



Inviting partners and guests into organizational spaces acts as a cultural exchange. It can provide staff with necessary teachings and understanding of how intricate and complex Indigenous ways of knowing truly are, and can in turn help to break down stereotypes, to humanize, and familiarize both parties. Prior to colonization, the traditional health practices of ceremony, rites of passage, storytelling, oral history, and governance systems were in place and continue to be utilized by Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island. These cultural practices are not past-tense and teach us that individual and communal health and wellbeing are holistic and directly linked to the relationship and dependence humans have on the land, the waterways, and all our relations. It is through these practices that *mino-bimaadiziwin* (the good life) is achieved: where emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health share equal importance and seek to remain in balance.

# Planting the Seeds for Community Climate Action

The health of all people depends on the health and stability of natural systems. However, systemic forces such as poverty and colonialism create vulnerabilities through social, economic or environmental circumstances. A local report confirms that in northern Ontario, residents are already seeing impacts across five categories: extreme temperatures, extreme weather events, food and water security, vector-borne diseases such as Lyme and West Nile, as well as mental health – and we are not alone. The Public Health Agency of Canada has declared that climate change is the largest health threat facing all Canadians.

In 2024, the Health Unit received a grant from the Ontario Resource Centre for Climate Adaptation that strengthened capacity building for long-term climate action across the region. The Health Unit brought community partners together for the first Climate Change Symposium, where they discussed the influence of climate change on the future of northern Ontario, and identified areas where more work could be done to help mitigate the predicted effects on population health and well-being. The event was successful in building a shared understanding of planetary health and a shared responsibility to do more. It resulted in a new group of multi-disciplinary organizations across the region who are continuing to share ideas and resources, and work together to prepare and protect our communities from climate threats.

# Doing More for Perinatal Mental Health

Perinatal mood and anxiety disorder (PMAD) is the term used to describe distressing feelings people experience during pregnancy and throughout the first year after pregnancy. These feelings include depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and in rare cases psychosis. They can range from mild to moderate to severe. Without treatment, symptoms may last a few weeks, several months or even years, depending on the severity.

Untreated depression or anxiety during pregnancy is associated with adverse perinatal outcomes such as preterm birth, low birth weight and poor infant development. It is estimated that 20% of mothers/birth parents experience perinatal mood disorders. As such, mental health issues that occur around the time of pregnancy have been deemed a major public health issue.

In 2022, the Health Unit region saw much higher rates than the provincial average:

	Health Unit region	Provincial average
Anxiety during pregnancy	41.5%	18.3%
Depression during pregnancy	26%	10.5 %
History of postpartum depression	8.3%	4.4%

In 2024, the Health Unit:

- Actively participated as a member of the Nipissing Parry Sound Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorder Network, a group of community service providers working together to lessen the impact of PMADS on local families and children.
- Designed a perinatal mental health referral pathway for Nipissing and Parry Sound districts
- Increased PMAD knowledge among community partners and healthcare providers
- Provided public education and awareness about perinatal mental health through social media, direct service delivery, and group presentations.
- Invested in training for Health Unit staff in the Healthy Families program, enhancing the ability of public health nurses to identify early warning signs of PMAD and intervene with clients during home visits.

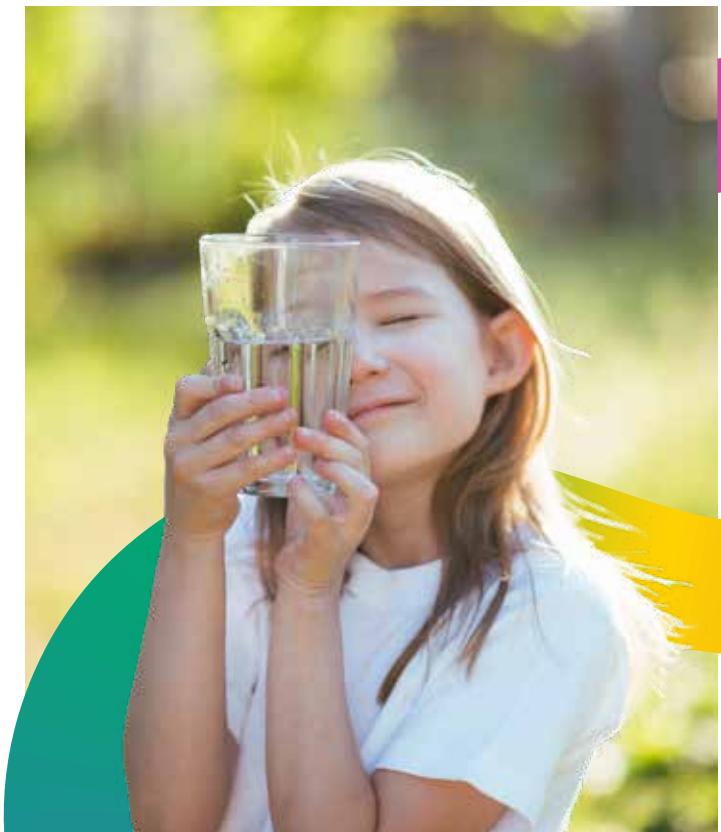


# Quality Improvement

**Automated Tasks:** The Health Unit's Environmental Health program oversees 514 small drinking water systems throughout the region, and is required to follow up on any of the systems that fall short on their sampling standards – something that was typically done every three months. Since implementing technology to automate routine administrative tasks such as email forwarding and data extraction, public health inspectors have each earned back an average of 8-11 hours over three months, now check drinking water system compliance monthly, and respond more quickly to the non-compliant systems. With this change, the program has been able to achieve a near 100% follow-up rate on non-compliant drinking water systems, further lowering the risk of waterborne illness.

**HealthEd Connect:** The Health Unit said goodbye to faxing with schools and launched HealthEd Connect, an online platform that securely streamlines communication between the Health Unit, school boards and school administrators. The new approach maintains compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

**Vaccine Consent Forms:** The Health Unit introduced two new ways for parents and guardians to submit their consent forms to have their children vaccinated at school. These digital alternatives to in-person form submission reduce the burden on parents and children whose consent forms go



missing between the time they are sent home and the time of the vaccine clinic at school. Since implementing the platforms, the Health Unit has noticed an increase in the number of consent forms coming in. This has led to more students being protected against illness and has helped the program to know how they can organize effective vaccine clinics in schools.

**Dental Meets Digital:** Similarly, the Oral Health program transitioned entirely to electronic data collection, saving time and reducing redundancies when it comes to screening school students for oral health concerns. They are also responding to patient inquiries more quickly and keeping up with their program's growing and evolving needs after implementing a new dental software program.

# 2024 Stats at a Glance

## Environmental Health

### Vector Borne Disease Surveillance

**169** human acquired ticks submitted for testing

### Safe Drinking Water

**7953** private water samples submitted by homeowners

**97** boil water advisories

**12** drinking water advisories

**141** inquiries responded to about reducing risks in home water systems, understanding their health effects, and preventing harmful algal blooms

### Inspection of Food Premises

**1,692** food facility compliance inspections completed

**251** food premises required re-inspections with a total of 353 re-inspections completed

### Responding to Complaints at Food Premises

**205** food-related complaints received; 45 of these complaints necessitated an inspection

**15** food handler certification courses offered

**63** exams proctored

**98%** of food handlers certified through the course

### Inspection and Consultation with Organizers of Community Food Events

**835** non-exempted special event applications reviewed

**24** inspections of non-exempted special events completed

**67** exempted event applications reviewed

## Inspection of Public Pools and Spas

**97** inspections of 35 public pools

**17** inspections of six public spas

**6** inspections of two public wading pools

**13** inspections of nine splash pads

## Investigation of Animal Exposure Incidents

**622** animal bite reports investigated

**66** mandatory vaccination letters issued to animal owners

## Inspection of Facilities to Prevent Infectious Diseases and Hazards

**34** inspections at recreational child camps, groups homes, active treatment centres and special care homes

**67** of 69 licensed childcare centres inspected and 13 re-inspections

**208** of 219 personal service establishments inspected, with 24 re-inspections

## Education to Tobacco Vendors

**145** tobacco vendors inspected and six re-inspections.

**110** vapour product vendors inspected and three re-inspections

**10** tobacco vendor warnings

**6** vapour product vendor warnings

**100%** of inspections resulted in tobacco vendor education

## Inspection of Workplace/Public Places under the Smoke-Free Ontario Act

**196** inspection of workplaces/public places and 12 re-inspections

**68** warnings issued

**0** tickets issued to workplaces/public places for non-compliance

## Communicable Disease Control

**916** reported cases of Diseases of Public Health Significance

**37** cases of invasive Group A Streptococcal (iGAS) infections (up from the Health Unit's annual average of 16 cases)

**106** outbreaks responded to:

- 23 enteric outbreaks in congregate living settings (long-term care homes, retirement homes, group homes and hospitals) and licensed childcare settings.
- 83 respiratory outbreaks in congregate living settings and the community

## Vaccinations

**9,475** vaccines provided at in-house clinics

**8,362** ministry funded vaccines provided in-office

**1,115** payable vaccines provided in-office

**7,645** influenza and COVID-19 vaccines administered (in-office and community clinics)

**21,465** doses of Influenza vaccine distributed to community partners

- 2,345 to long-term care and retirement homes
- 2,765 to hospitals
- 16,355 to health care providers and agencies

Not all heroes wear capes—some wear vests! Below, staff pose for a picture at a COVID-19 vaccine and flu shot clinic in Magnetawan.



**4,829** doses of COVID-19 vaccine distributed to long-term care homes, retirement homes and hospitals

**2,500+** doses of RSV vaccine and antibody treatment distributed to community partners

**113** doses of RSV vaccine administered by the Health Unit

## Vaccinating Students at School

**16,811** student immunization records assessed for 2024 vaccine eligibility

**99** school clinics held:

- 84 in grade 7/8 schools
- 15 in secondary schools

**1,937** students immunized in schools:

- 1,459 grade 7/8 students
- 478 secondary schools students

**3,991** vaccines administered at school:

- 3,292 grade 7/8 students
- 699 secondary schools students

## Immunization Record Assessments in Childcare Centres

**59** Childcare Centres records were assessed:

- 1,455 student and staff immunization records assessed at registration
- 616 staff, volunteers, family member immunization records assessed during the year
- 1,976 records assessed during the annual assessment process

## Other

**122** fridge (vaccine storage) inspections completed

**17,324** calls received and responded to

## Oral Health

**5,475** eligible students screened in school

**3,027** in-clinic appointments

- 1,405 appointments with eligible clients aged 17 and under
- 560 appointments held with eligible clients aged 18 and older
- 1,062 in-house appointments held with eligible clients aged 65 and older

**1,112** appointments facilitated by external service providers for eligible clients aged 65 and older

**305** dentures completed and paid for

**1,353** minutes spent navigating calls for the Canadian Dental Care Program

## Sexual Health

**1,665** unique client interactions in clinics

**2,385** appointments (in-person or virtual)

**4,134** client interactions

**52** booked appointments with students in secondary schools

**467** drop-in appointments with students in secondary schools

## Healthy Families

**1,891** encounters on the Family Health Information Line

**742** home visits to families at risk

**469** families referred to the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program

**438** follow-up calls with individuals postpartum

**226** children actively screened for developmental milestones

**181** breastfeeding clinic encounters

**16** families enrolled in online prenatal education

**15** eligible families participated in the 16 week Families in the Kitchen food skills program



# 2024–2027 Strategic Plan

On June 27, the Health Unit launched its 2024–2027 Strategic Plan. Informed by 847 clients, district residents, Health Unit employees, board members and community partners, the strategic priorities and goals outlined in the plan will guide Health Unit activities and interventions over the next three years, in conjunction with the Ontario Public Health Standards.

## PRIORITY 1

### Organizational Well-Being

**Goal:** To enhance engagement, learning, wellness and development in our culture.



## PRIORITY 2

### Health Equity

**Goal:** To catalyze community attention and allocation of Health Unit resources to address social determinants of health.

## PRIORITY 3

### Communication, Connection and Collaboration

**Goal:** To bolster external relationships to enhance public health outcomes.

Hearing from community members and re-aligning priorities brought a natural opportunity to renew the organization's vision, mission and values. As such, included in the Strategic Plan are principles that will guide, inspire, motivate and align the Health Unit's efforts and culture going forward:

# Vision

A healthy community for all.

# Mission

To foster healthy communities through partnership, preparedness, prevention, promotion, and protection.

# Values

**Accountability** We serve responsibly with honesty and transparency.

**Adaptability** We respond flexibly to emerging trends and circumstances.

**Collaboration** We increase capacity and connection through partnership.

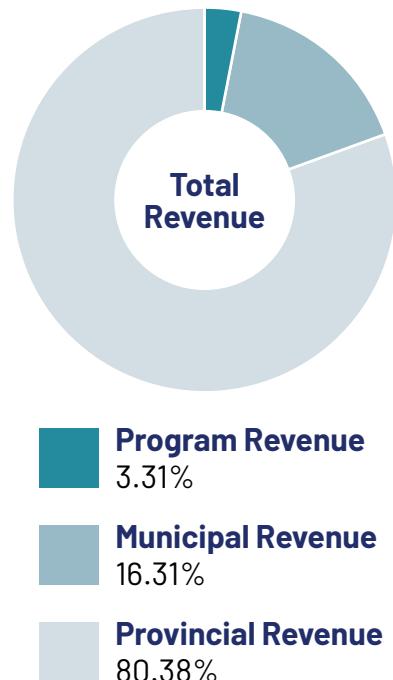
**Equity** We act justly and fairly, respecting unique needs.

**Empathy** We are compassionate and understanding.

This roadmap will guide the Health Unit in fostering healthy communities across the district. Appreciation is expressed to each individual who took part in the Strategic Plan development process and the time taken to express such exceptional ideas, views and perspectives in surveys, interviews and focus groups. Individuals can view the full Strategic Plan in English and French at [myhealthunit.ca/strategicplan](http://myhealthunit.ca/strategicplan).

# 2024 Unaudited Expenditures

Program & Service	Dollars (\$)
Foundational Standards	1,514,898
Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being	3,400,202
Substance Use and Injury Prevention	1,095,715
Food Safety	970,535
Healthy Environments	326,276
Healthy Growth and Development	1,135,579
Immunization	1,593,482
Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control	2,749,930
Safe Water	811,428
School Health	2,410,999
Indirect Costs	4,917,941
Miscellaneous One Time Expenses	657,748
Other Programs	1,360,823
<b>Total Expense</b>	<b>22,945,557</b>



Thank you to  
the Health Unit's  
staff and  
leadership  
who contributed  
to this report.