

This Morning's Issues - May 25, 2017

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Date: Thu, 25 May 2017 07:36:39 -0400

Cabinet Office/Corporate Issues Morning Issues List

May 25, 2017

Refugees 'In The Crosshairs' As Legal Aid Ontario Battles For Government Funding, Advocates Warn

Agency Says It Has No Choice But To Slash Refugee Services — But Many Say Cuts Could Be 'Devastating' - Moves by Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) to slash services for refugees have immigration advocates sounding the alarm, saying the measures threaten to hold vulnerable asylum seekers hostage in the organization's fight for added government funding. The mounting concern comes as the arm's-length provincial agency launches a consultation process to look into what it calls the "difficult choice" to temporarily suspend some of the services, beginning July 1.

With more refugees pouring in, Toronto advocates ringing alarms about federal funding. But while it's not known yet exactly which services will be cut to address the organization's 40 per cent shortfall in its immigration and refugee program, many are worried about the impact on refugees as the organization makes its case for additional provincial and federal support. "When I say that the cuts will be devastating, I mean that literally they could result in a return to persecution, torture or death," Osgoode Hall law professor Sean Rehaag told CBC Toronto. "LAO is using a really problematic negotiating tactic here."

Ontario Ombudsman Is Investigating Licence Suspension System - The Ontario ombudsman Paul Dubé announced that he would be investigating how the Ministry of Transportation communicates news of licence suspensions and reinstatements to motorists. Dubé said, "we have heard from drivers who went for years without knowing their licences were suspended ... When they finally found out, it was through their insurance company or police, not the ministry..." The ongoing complaints, despite efforts by the ministry and the ombudsman to improve communication, suggests "an underlying systemic problem" Dubé said. The press secretary to Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca said that the ministry "takes the concerns of the ombudsman very seriously."

Minister To Overhaul Ontario Jails, Following Release Of Sapers Report - Marie-France

Lalonde, Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services, says she is determined to make Ontario an international model for humane correctional practises. Two weeks ago, independent corrections adviser and federal corrections ombudsman Howard Sapers released a report on solitary confinement and Ontario's segregation practises. Lalonde called the Sapers report "fair" and pledged to tackle each of its 63 recommendations. "Every one of those recommendations is important," she said. Lalonde says she intends to introduce new legislation this fall to reflect his recommendations. She also pledged to establish independent adjudicators and correctional facilities to oversee solitary confinement cases.

Report From Financial Accountability Officer Shows Cost Of Hydro Rates Cut - The provincial financial accountability officer Stephen LeClair has found that over the next three decades Ontarians will pay \$21 billion for hydro despite the province's Fair Hydro Plan which lowers electricity costs by 25 per cent. LeClair's report says that the Fair Hydro Plan will cost the province \$45 billion over 29 years while saving ratepayers \$24 billion for a \$21 billion net expense. He added that these estimates are only applicable if "the province is able to achieve and maintain a balanced budget over 29 years." If the province cannot maintain a balanced budget the estimates grow to anywhere from \$69 billion to \$93 billion. LeClair says that although ratepayers will achieve savings of \$24 billion it will not be spread evenly over time and electricity costs are expected to increase by 2027. He further questioned whether or not the province is bankrolling the cut through its electricity utility Ontario Power Generation which could mean an addition \$4 billion in interest costs. Auditor general Bonnie Lysyk will be conducting her own review of the hydro rate plan later this year.

New Data On Opioid Use May Help Combat Crisis - The new online tracker launched by the province to monitor opioids' impact shows that more than 400 Ontarians died from an overdose in just the first six months of last year. The access to this data is part of a strategy to fight addiction and overdose deaths. The "opioid tracker" has more than 13 years' worth of statistics, listing cases that required medical care, hospitalization or resulted in death, and is meant primarily for health-care workers, but is also accessible to the public. A joint statement from Health Minister Eric Hoskins, Chief Medical Officer of Health David Williams, and Chief Coroner Dirk Huyer, said "The opioid crisis in Ontario is a growing and evolving problem, and one we are continuing to work diligently to combat."

Procter And Gamble Closing Brockville Plant - Brockville's largest private-sector employer, Procter and Gamble, announced its impending closure on Wednesday. It is set to close as early as 2020, moving production to West Virginia, costing 480 jobs locally. The company will work with each employee individually towards their desired outcomes. The company mostly produces Bounce and Swiffer products. Jeff LeRoy, a P&G company communications spokesperson said that while the local site had exceeded the company's performance expectations, the decision came after a years-long review of "how the company goes to market." He said the company has been examining how to redesign and transform its supply network in North America for four years. The property upon which the new plant in West Virginia is located is "three to four" times the size of the Brockville site, which will allow the company to integrate, on-site, with suppliers of raw materials they use to make their products. Leeds-Grenville MPP Steve Clark said the closure is a "devastating announcement" and plans to co-ordinate with other levels of government to "explore every possibility of reversing the company's regrettable decision to close a profitable plant." He went on to blame the provincial government for the closure, saying "we've seen a hollowing out of the manufacturing sector."

Toronto Star Columnist Martin Regg Cohn: Will High-Speed Rail Be Worth It For Ontario? - High-speed rail has taken a U-turn in Ontario. For decades, all roads - or at least routes - led to

Montreal. Driven by the perennial national unity debate, premiers preened for annual photo-ops while promising to bind Ontario and Quebec not just economically, but politically. Yet high-speed rail remained stuck on a slow train that never left the station.

Now, the destination is in another direction - with westward stops in Guelph, Kitchener-Waterloo and London.

Why the turnaround? And why did the Quebec quest reach a dead end? Today, the politics are more provincial than national, and the economics are more practical than aspirational. Premier Kathleen Wynne dreams, no doubt, of harvesting more votes by proclaiming Ontario's biggest-ever infrastructure project - a sleek high-speed train with all the bells and whistles - as her \$20-billion legacy. But southwestern Ontario is hardly fertile territory for her governing Liberals, and she's unlikely to be in office to drive the last spike eight to 14 years from now.

National Post Columnist Terence Corcoran: High Speed To Fiscal Ruin - When it comes to railroading voters and taxpayers, few jurisdictions can match Ontario under Kathleen Wynne's current Liberal government.

Headline news, May 24: "Ontario will spend \$45 billion to save ratepayers \$24 billion on electricity bills, watchdog says." That's the kind of financial math Ontario voters have grown accustomed to over the last decade. According to the independent Financial Accountability Office, the resulting \$21-billion future loss will be borne by taxpayers for decades to come. It could get worse. The FAO says that "If the Province funds the FHP (Fair Hydro Plan) through borrowing, it could increase costs by \$24 to \$48 billion, bringing the total Provincial cost of the FHP to between \$69 and \$93 billion." Or it could get even worse. Here's another headline not yet written but based on an official economic report funded by the province: "Ontario will spend \$25 billion on Toronto-London high-speed rail line that will produce revenues of \$12 billion." Total loss: \$13-billion.

Metrolinx To Appeal Bombardier Ruling; Agency Asks Court To Clarify Decision To Preserve Contract - Metrolinx has filed an appeal questioning the decision of an Ontario judge last month that preserved the transit agency's contract with Bombardier Transportation. The notice of appeal deepens the legal dispute between the Ontario transit agency and Bombardier over the company's ability to fulfil train orders in Toronto, where gridlock has become an increasing frustration for hundreds of thousands of commuters. In April, a judge ruled that Metrolinx can't cancel a \$770-million contract with Bombardier without first going through dispute resolution. Metrolinx earlier this month also turned to a French manufacturer for light-rail vehicles as a backup plan if Bombardier fails to deliver the contracted transit projects. Ontario has reached a \$528-million agreement to buy 61 light-rail vehicles from Alstom in case Bombardier is found to be in default at the end of a court-ordered dispute resolution process.

Ontario's New Online Tracker Confirms Opioid Epidemic Sweeping East - The number of people who died of opioid overdoses in Ontario jumped 11 per cent in the first six months of 2016, according to new figures showing that the epidemic is rapidly moving east from Western Canada. Ontario has not been hit as hard as British Columbia, the epicentre of the crisis where fatal overdoses spiked 80 per cent between 2015 and 2016. But the spread to Ontario is happening quickly, with at least 412 people dying of opioid overdoses in the first six months of 2016, compared with 371 in the same period of 2015. "The numbers are definitely increasing and are definitely alarming," said Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins. In an effort to help policy makers and health-care workers in Ontario better understand the scope of the problem, Dr. Hoskins unveiled an online surveillance system on Wednesday. The interactive opioid tracker makes a wide range of data publicly available, including the number of deaths, hospitalizations and emergency department visits from drug overdoses dating back to 2003.

Council Moves Ahead With Relief Line Plan; Project Still Unfunded As Mayor John Tory Reiterates Call For Province To Help Pay For Subway, Estimated To Cost \$6.8B - City council has voted to move ahead with planning work for the relief line subway, although it remains unclear who will pay to build the vital but as-yet-unfunded transit project. In a vote of 42-1, councillors endorsed a city report that gave the green light for city and TTC staff to advance the design of the first phase of the relief line, which the TTC has identified as Toronto's most pressing transit priority. In a council speech, Mayor John Tory called the vote "a big step forward" for the city's transit plans. However, he reiterated calls for the province to help pay for the subway, which is estimated to cost \$6.8 billion and has no firm funding commitment from any level of government. Tory acknowledged Queen's Park has invested in Toronto transit in the past, but urged them not to turn off the tap now.

Councillor Wants MPPs Up To Speed On Social Housing Repair - Councillor Ana Bailao is proposing council ask Mayor John Tory to send personal letters to individual Toronto MPPs about the dire state of social housing in their ridings - and potential impact on their constituents. Bailao, chair of the city's affordable housing committee, will table a motion at this week's council meeting requesting Tory write to the provincial politicians outlining "the number of units at risk of closing without provincial funding." "It's important that MPPs have this information at their fingertips," Bailao said Wednesday. Bailao said she wanted council's endorsement to "depoliticize" the issue. "We are three levels of government that need to work together. It's not about politics." The motion is seconded by Councillor Joe Cressy.

Five Elementary Schools In London Area Slated To Shut Down Over Next Three Years - Anchor: Five area elementary schools are slated to shut down over the next three years after Thames Valley trustees voted for a clean sweep of closures. Brent Lale has the details tonight. Reporter: Perhaps the flag at Springfield Public School should be flying at half-mast today. Johnny Wilson, Parent: They are going to cut the heart out of Springfield, which basically means this village is gonna die. Reporter: Despite the efforts of a number of Elgin County parents, they couldn't stop the closure of five elementary schools. Rebecca Clark, parent: The whole community has spent months of our own time away from the families that we are trying to advocate so strongly for and it felt like a lot of them just threw it in the trash. Unidentified 1: This is not an easy decision. But if we always let our heartstrings win we would still have one-room school houses and that is not what our students need to move forward.

Homeless Death Rate 'Staggering,' Activists Say; 'Our City Is Failing,' Councillor Says Of Data Showing Average Of More Than 2 Deaths Per Week This Year - Homeless people in Toronto are dying at a rate of more than two per week on average, according to disturbing new data collected by the city. From January to the end of March 2017, a total of 27 homeless deaths were tracked in an expanded research initiative led by Toronto Public Health and supported by about 200 health and social services agencies. The median age of the deceased is 51. "It's a sign that our city is failing," said city Councillor Joe Cressy (Trinity-Spadina). "It seems to me in a city as wealthy as ours that to have dozens of people dying on the streets is wrong, it's disturbing and it's a failure on all of us. While we might not be able to prevent the loss of every life, we certainly can prevent many of these if we do more." Advocates for the homeless have long maintained that efforts thus far to accurately count the dead have under-reported the true scope of the tragedy.

Teenagers Score High In Financial Literacy; Canadian Youth Place Third Among Countries Participating In The Assessment - Canadian teens earn high rankings in financial literacy - including

in Ontario, where changes to the curriculum have paid off in the latest round of international testing. The seven participating provinces outranked almost all other jurisdictions in the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, coming in third overall after China and the Flemish community in Belgium. "We are pleased that Ontario students performed among the top jurisdictions in the world in financial literacy," said Ontario Education Minister Mitzi Hunter of the test written by 15-year-olds. "I want to thank all of our educators for their hard work in helping students reach their full potential. Ontario believes preparing students to be financially literate is essential to student success and a brighter future."

PC Leader Wants More Accessible Health Care – The Sault Star reports, two-tier health care should not be permitted to operate in Ontario, charges Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown. Brown, and byelection candidate Ross Romano called for more timely and accessible health care in Sault Ste. Marie - and around the North - to ensure that all Ontarians receive the same level of care and services. He charged there is not enough timely and reliable health care in Sault Ste. Marie and patients are often forced to travel hours to get the health care treatment and tests they need. Brown and Romano called on the provincial government to improve patient care in Sault Ste. Marie by investing in a mobile PET scanner. The position emission tomography scan is a diagnostic tool that allows doctors to be able to better diagnose cancers, heart illnesses and neurological diseases. He said a mobile unit could be - and should be - available in Sault Ste. Marie and Northern Ontario.

Hospital Needs Millions More: Union – The Sudbury Star reports, CUPE executives are asking whether the Liberal government's decision to give Sault Area Hospital a higher funding increase than other Northern Ontario hospitals could be related to the fact Sault Ste. Marie is in the middle of a provincial byelection. Michael Hurley, CUPE's Ontario Council of Hospital Unions, travelled Wednesday to Sudbury, where he noted that the majority of Northern Ontario hospitals, including Health Sciences North, which has a regional hospital with a cancer centre, got \$5.8 million or about a 2 per cent funding increase, while the Sault Area Hospital saw a 3.8 per cent allocation that amounts to \$5.5 million in 2017. Although the Sault Area Hospital fared better than other Northern hospitals, Hurley said, the money it received in throes of the byelection "the Liberals are desperate to win, is still not enough to restore staff, beds and services that have been cut following eight years shrinking provincial funding for hospitals."

Positions Eliminated; Hospital Moving Beds, Cutting Role Of Addiction Worker - The North Bay Regional Health Centre will no longer be using addiction workers as part of its inpatient detox program. The health centre is doing away with the role of addiction workers as part of a plan to relocate six withdrawal management service beds from its King Street treatment centre to the main hospital site on College Drive. "Unfortunately, this move will result in the elimination of the addiction worker role, which means early exit and early retirement letters have been sent to affected staff," said Kim McElroy, the health centre's manager of communications. "Until we receive responses to these letters we don't know the final impact on total staffing numbers." The relocation of the beds is part of the latest round of cuts at the North Bay Regional Health Centre, which indicated in March between 30 and 40 positions would be eliminated in an effort to find \$5 million in savings in order to balance its 2017-18 budget. The six beds are expected to be relocated to the hospital's acute inpatient psychiatry unit, where existing resources will be used to provide care to patients.

MPP Advocates For Separate Boards To Combine Efforts - Questions with no immediate answers left Simcoe County and Muskoka residents confused after a public meeting on rural education strategy. "I think we ended up with more questions than answers," said Michele MacDonald, president

of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association's Simcoe-Muskoka branch. "The first thing we looked at was that if you don't have a school in a community, what's the impact on the community? It's far reaching. If you don't have a school, how do you draw people into the community? How do we force conversations between municipalities and school boards before there's discussion around closure?" These questions came Tuesday evening from group discussions held during a public session at Baxter Ward Community Centre in Honey Harbour. The session was conducted by consultants hired by the Ministry of Education, while Durham MPP Granville Anderson was also on site to listen in on conversations between teachers, school board representatives and parents. "This process is trying to get community involvement and ask them what they would like to see for their schools," he said. "If you remove a school from a community, the community dies because there are no young families moving in." The meeting came after the community faced accommodation reviews for two local schools: Our Lady of Mercy Catholic School (Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board) and Honey Harbour Public School (Trillium Lakelands District School Board).