

CAO's Optometric Leadership Forum 2026

2026 Summary Report

Each year, the Canadian Association of Optometrists convenes leaders in optometry from across Canada to discuss strategic issues shaping the profession. The Optometric Leadership Forum serves as an important platform, bringing together representatives from provincial associations, regulatory authorities, academia, and industry to collaboratively address shared challenges and help shape the future of optometry in Canada.

On January 22–23, 2026, **110 participants** from across the country gathered in Ottawa to engage in discussions focused on building advocacy skills and strengthening engagement in policy and government relations.



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRISTS
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Highlights from Panel Discussions

Panel discussion on navigating government priorities and advancing advocacy through engagement with elected officials.

Panelists

Peter Cleary, *Principal, Santis Health & former political staffer having spent a decade supporting five cabinet ministers, in three different governments, including supporting two Health Ministers at both the federal and provincial levels.*

Avis Favaro, *Canada's longest-serving television Medical Correspondent formerly with CTV.*

The panel discussion, which kicked off the OLF reception dinner, featured insights from two speakers with extensive experience in policy and public communication. Peter Cleary, Principal at Santis Health, brought a deep understanding of government relations shaped by a decade as a political staffer. He was joined by Avis Favaro, Canada's longest-serving television Medical Correspondent, formerly with CTV, who offered valuable perspective on media dynamics, public narrative, and health communication.

Key Points

● Sustained Advocacy

Policymakers face significant competition for attention; issues require consistent, sustained advocacy to remain visible and advance on the political agenda.

● Economic Framing

Governments are responsive to issues that demonstrate clear economic and workforce impacts, including implications for employability and productivity. Issues should be framed with respect to these impacts to gain government attention.

● Closing the Awareness Gap

There is a persistent gap between public understanding of optometry, and the full scope of care optometrists provide, highlighting the need for creative, innovative, and accessible messaging and tailored outreach.

● Timing Matters

Sustained attention typically requires a convergence of importance, relevance, and the right political moment.

● Public Awareness

Public awareness is a critical driver of policy action – government engagement is more likely once an issue has gained broader public relevance and support.

Key Points (continued)

- **Multi-Channel Messaging**

Media is increasingly crowded and reactive, with shifting platforms (e.g., younger audiences relying more on Reddit and social media than traditional outlets for news). Organizations should not rely solely on traditional media; repetitive, consistent, and creative messaging across multiple channels, including digital platforms and social media is essential to build momentum.

- **Human-Centred Stories**

Effective media coverage is driven by human-centred stories; personal, tangible examples that people can relate to tend to gain more attention than technical or abstract messaging.

Panel discussion on how and what data is needed to move forward advocacy objectives

Panelists

Marcel Saulnier, *Past Associate Assistant Deputy Minister for the Strategic Policy Branch of Health Canada.*

Glenn Brimacombe, *Director Policy and Public Affairs – Canadian Psychological Association*

Dr. Mark Eltis, *President College of Optometrists of Ontario*

Dr. Bronwyn Mulherin, *New Brunswick Association of Optometrists*

This panel brought together senior leaders from government, professional associations, and regulatory bodies to share perspectives on advocacy, policy engagement, and leadership within the health sector. Marcel Saulnier, Past Associate Assistant Deputy Minister for the Strategic Policy Branch of Health Canada, offered insight into federal health policy development and government decision-making. He was joined by Glenn Brimacombe, Director of Policy and Public Affairs at the Canadian Psychological Association, who provided a national association perspective on public affairs and advocacy strategy. The panel also featured clinical and regulatory leadership from the optometry community, including Dr. Mark Eltis, President of the College of Optometrists of Ontario, and Dr. Bronwyn Mulherin of the New Brunswick Association of Optometrists, who shared frontline perspectives on professional advocacy, governance, and engagement with policymakers at the provincial level.



Key Points

- **Data is a Tool, Not a Solution**

Good data is necessary for effective advocacy, but not sufficient. Data must be paired with appropriate analysis and translated into compelling narratives that resonate with policymakers and the public. Data should answer policy-relevant questions, such as those regarding:

- The scope and distribution of vision health needs
- Access gaps and vulnerable populations
- Best practices and international comparisons
- Return on investment and health outcomes associated with increased government focus on optometric care

- **Optometry's Role in Team-Based Care**

Optometry has a clear role to play within team-based care models. While optometry being underrepresented in data systems like CIHI poses a challenge, it is also an opportunity for the profession to define its own narrative and value proposition.

- **Complementary Evidence Strategies**

Policymakers tend to prioritize evidence related to system performance, outcomes, and cost-effectiveness, whereas public-facing tools (e.g. report cards, public opinion data, rankings) are often more effective at generating political pressure. Both approaches can be complementary.

- **Adapt to Political Context**

Advocacy strategies should adapt to shifting political cycles and priorities, aligning messaging with broader government goals.

Panel discussion on advancing objectives with government ministries

Panelists

Dr. Brendan Carr, *Past President & CEO of the Nova Scotia Health Authority, William Osler Health System, and Island Health in British Columbia*

Dr. Evelyn Lo, *President of B.C. Doctors of Optometry*

Me Maryse Nolin, *Executive Director Association des optométristes du Québec*

Dr. Sheldon Pothier, *Registrar Nova Scotia College of Optometry*

This panel brought together senior leaders from health system leadership, professional associations, and regulation to examine concrete successes and challenges in advancing objectives with provincial ministries. The discussion featured Brendan Carr, former President and CEO of the Nova Scotia Health Authority who provided insights from a senior health system and bureaucratic perspective. He was joined by Dr. Evelyn Lo, President of BC Doctors of Optometry, Me Maryse Nolin, Executive Director of the Association des optométristes du Québec, and Dr. Sheldon Pothier, Registrar of the Nova Scotia College of Optometry. Together, the panel explored practical strategies, lessons learned, and key conditions for success when engaging provincial governments, with particular attention to aligning professional objectives with ministry priorities and policy processes.

Key Points

- Educating decision-makers on the real scope of optometric care, including through site visits (clinics, training environments, low-vision settings) to correct misconceptions about time, complexity, and resource requirements has been successful in making progress with ministries.
- In British Columbia, a children's vision screening initiative advanced by maintaining early dialogue with government, then pivoting to pilot implementation when funding was unavailable through traditional channels. Partnerships with regional health authorities (e.g., Vancouver Coastal; Interior Health) helped accelerate implementation and demonstrate value at a manageable scale. Visibility and public-facing momentum mattered: communications and targeted outreach to parents helped drive utilization and broaden support for children's vision care initiatives.

- Government priorities shift quickly due to elections, competing crises, and changing leadership. Progress tends to slow when key internal champions move roles or ministries become overloaded with other files.
- Proposals struggled when they were framed as profession-centred, rather than public-benefit/system-impact focused, or when regulatory submissions were perceived as professional advocacy rather than grounded in public protection.
- In Quebec, successful negotiations were supported by:
 - Strong groundwork (e.g., cost studies)
 - Early and sustained member preparation, including clear key messages and communications through social media groups, enabling members to confidently respond to patient questions during negotiations
 - Sustained internal engagement (e.g. frequent updates and coordinated communications)
 - Direct education of government decision-makers to demonstrate the full scope, complexity, and costs of optometric care
- Public protection must be positioned as the core regulatory frame, and requests should be anchored in patient and system outcomes.

A recurring theme was that governments respond better when regulators, associations, and educators demonstrate collaboration and coherence, rather than fractured or adversarial relationships.

An Update on Bill C-284

***Bonnie Kirkwood**, Director of Advocacy and Government Relations, Canadian Association of Optometrists*

***Dr. Alison Scott**, President, Canadian Association of Optometrists*

The CAO provided an update on our submission to Health Canada alongside the one developed by the Vision Partners' coalition. The presentation highlighted the importance of coordinated, collaborative, and unified advocacy to advance national vision care priorities.

The full submission to Health Canada can be found by following [this link](#).

Workshop: Mobilizing Membership

In the afternoon, attendees worked in small groups to discuss what works in engaging in membership, how to support engagement, and more on student engagement.

Key Takeaways



What Works in Engaging Members

- In-person engagement and relationship-building, including visits to workplaces and regional meetings, are highly effective.
- Targeted outreach and personalization increase participation, particularly when members feel recognized and valued.
- Members who are directly affected by an issue or motivated by meaningful change are more likely to engage.
- Regular communication that keeps members informed while inviting feedback supports sustained engagement.
- Change, whether positive or negative, often acts as a catalyst for increased member involvement.



How to Support Engagement

- Lower barriers to participation, particularly for younger members who prioritize ease and accessibility.
- Greater focus on addressing time, cost, and knowledge gaps that limit participation.
- Clear, bite-sized advocacy actions that fit within members' time constraints.
- Practical tools and training to build members confidence in government relations and advocacy activities.
- Use of diverse engagement channels, including multiple social media platforms.



Student Engagement

- Early engagement during school, beginning in the first year, can help to build long-term advocacy involvement.
- In person campus visits and face-to-face interactions are more effective with students.
- Targeted programming for new graduates to support the transition to practice.
- Reducing financial and logistical barriers increases student participation (e.g. timing of events with respect to student exam schedules and workload).



Breakout Groups

Participants took part in facilitated breakout sessions focused on priority areas for advancing advocacy and engagement across the profession. Attendees selected one of four thematic discussions and worked collaboratively to respond to guided questions.



Public Education & Awareness

- Multi-channel professionally designed public education campaigns that target parents and caregivers are the most effective, particularly when delivered consistently across platforms.
- Programs such as *Eye See Eye Learn* demonstrate strong impact, though participants noted the need for simplification, broader reach, and national coordination.
- Public understanding of optometry remains limited, with persistent misconceptions that care is primarily retail-focused and centred only on vision correction.
- Campaigns are more successful when they emphasize prevention, early detection, and real-world health outcomes rather than routine exams alone.
- Collaboration with insurers, educators, and other health professionals was identified as a key opportunity to amplify messaging.
- Measuring success requires defined metrics, including appointment uptake, digital engagement, surveys, and available insurance or utilization data.



Professional Education Outreach

- Most education about eye health for medical students and allied health professionals is still physician-led, with inconsistent optometry involvement.
- In-person lectures, hands-on training, and interprofessional learning opportunities are more effective than virtual or passive approaches.

Professional Education Outreach (continued)

- Significant gaps remain in other health professionals' understanding of optometrists' scope, clinical expertise, and role in managing medical eye conditions.
- Relationship-based outreach such as clinic open houses, targeted communications, and conference participation builds trust and referral pathways.
- Opportunities exist to formalize exposure to optometry through medical school placements, emergency department collaboration, and interprofessional education.
- Success should be evaluated through referral patterns, curriculum changes, surveys, and increases in acute or medical eye care encounters.



Federal/Provincial Knowledge Transfer

- Provincial success stories (e.g., school vision screening, telehealth, Indigenous-led initiatives) highlight the value of sharing best practices nationally.
- Lessons from provincial advocacy models highlight the importance of dedicated in-house expertise and resources, rather than reliance on traditional external agencies.
- National knowledge transfer is limited by fragmented data, inconsistent regulation, and a lack of coordinated federal–provincial mechanisms to identify and disseminate successful initiatives.
- Participants emphasized the need for vision health to be included in existing intergovernmental and health system coordination forums, alongside strengthening consistent knowledge mobilization, messaging, and feedback loops across jurisdictions.
- Workforce data gaps including recruitment, retention, mobility, and training pathways limit effective planning and policy alignment.
- Improved collaboration would benefit from standardized data collection, shared reporting, structured post-mortems, and improved use of existing national meetings and networks.
- Greater alignment across provinces, supported by a strengthened coordinating role for the CAO as a two-way knowledge conduit and repository of best practices, could support mobility, consistency in care, and system-level planning.



Research & Data

- Optometrists can play a central role in a national vision health surveillance system by contributing standardized clinical and utilization data.
- Pooling clinic-level data nationally offers significant benefits for advocacy and planning but raises challenges related to privacy, governance, resources, and infrastructure.
- Access to vision care particularly in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities remains difficult to assess due to inconsistent data and reporting.
- Participants identified the need for better tools to anticipate workforce supply and demand, including retirement trends and regional distribution.
- Incentives such as training exposure, financial supports, and alternative delivery models were identified as ways to improve rural practice uptake.
- Advancing a national surveillance system will require clear leadership, shared standards, funding, and collaboration across jurisdictions.