



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRISTS
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES OPTOMÉTRISTES

October 13, 2026

The Honourable Uzoma Asagwara
Minister of Health, Seniors and Long-Term Care

The Honourable Bernadette Smith
Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness
Minister responsible for Mental Health

Re: Expanding optometry training and scope of practice in Canada

Dear Ministers Asagwara and Smith,

On behalf of the Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO), I am writing to you as co-hosts of the upcoming Federal-Provincial-Territorial meeting of ministers to ask you and your colleagues to include optometry in health workforce planning. Specifically, we encourage all provinces and territories to support new optometry programs proposed in Alberta and New Brunswick and enable optometrists to work to their full scope of practice.

Canada relies on the United States to train half of its optometrists

There are only two schools of optometry in Canada: the University of Waterloo and the Université de Montréal. Because of this, [about half of the optometrists practising in Canada earned their Doctor of Optometry degree in the United States](#).

That leaves Canada vulnerable: we have little say over how many U.S. spaces are open to Canadians or what they cost. A resilient health workforce means training more of our own optometrists.

Optometrists are essential to primary and preventive care

Optometrists' work goes well beyond glasses and contact lenses. They diagnose and manage eye disease, monitor the eyes of patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes, and often spot signs of systemic disease such as hypertension.

They also treat urgent and routine eye problems and catch issues early, before they become costlier to treat. One Ontario study recorded [more than 774,000 eye-related emergency department visits over five years](#). Many of those visits could have been handled by an optometrist, closer to home and at lower cost.

Demand for eye care is growing

[More than eight million Canadians have one of four major eye conditions that can threaten sight, and 1.2 million live with significant vision loss or blindness](#). The National Strategy for Eye Care expects those numbers to rise as the population ages. In 2019, vision loss cost the health system an estimated [\\$9.5 billion in direct spending](#).

Full scope of practice can improve access to care

Many patients wait months to see eye specialists, and gaps in care persist in rural and northern communities. Provinces and territories are looking for practical ways to shorten wait lists, remove

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barriers to care, and improve health outcomes. Enabling optometrists to work to their full scope of practice is one such opportunity. Provincial governments and regulators are reviewing safe additions to optometrists' authorized procedures, including in-office, non-sedated laser treatment for secondary cataracts and glaucoma. U.S. experience supports the safe delivery of these procedures by trained optometrists in regulated settings: across more than 146,000 laser procedures performed by optometrists, only two negative outcomes were reported, representing a complication rate of approximately 0.001%. Expanding access in this way would allow more patients to be treated closer to home, often in a single visit, while preserving specialist capacity for more complex cases.

An opportunity to build capacity in Canada

Mount Royal University and the University of New Brunswick, working with the University of Waterloo, are proposing the first optometry programs in Western and Atlantic Canada. These programs could also train students from neighbouring provinces and territories.

Federal funding is available now

The timing is right. Through the Provincial and Territorial stream of the Build Communities Strong Fund, [the federal government has committed \\$5 billion over three years for health infrastructure](#), and medical schools are among the eligible projects. **To access this funding, provinces and territories must submit a priority list of projects to the federal government by March 2027.**

We encourage provinces and territories to use this funding opportunity to help launch the proposed optometry programs in Alberta and New Brunswick, which would expand training capacity for Western and Atlantic Canada and benefit neighbouring provinces and territories. The upcoming ministers' meeting could also provide an opportunity to discuss regional approaches, including seat-purchase arrangements, so provinces and territories without their own optometry school can still help build and benefit from expanded training capacity.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Joelle Walker
CEO, Canadian Association of Optometrists

CC:

The Honourable Ravi Kahlon, Minister of Health, British Columbia
The Honourable Justin Wright, Minister of Primary and Preventative Health Services, Alberta
The Honourable Adriana LaGrange, Minister of Hospital and Surgical Health Services, Alberta
The Honourable Jeremy Cockrill, Minister of Health, Saskatchewan
The Honourable Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, Ontario

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The Honourable Sonia Bélanger, Minister of Health, Quebec
The Honourable John Dornan, Minister of Health, New Brunswick
The Honourable Michelle Thompson, Minister of Health and Wellness, Nova Scotia
The Honourable Cory Deagle, Minister of Health and Wellness, Prince Edward Island
The Honourable Joedy Wall, Minister of Health and Community Services, Newfoundland and Labrador
The Honourable Brad Cathers, Minister of Health and Social Services, Yukon
The Honourable Lucy Kuptana, Minister of Health and Social Services, Northwest Territories
The Honourable Janet Pitsiulaaq Brewster, Minister of Health, Nunavut