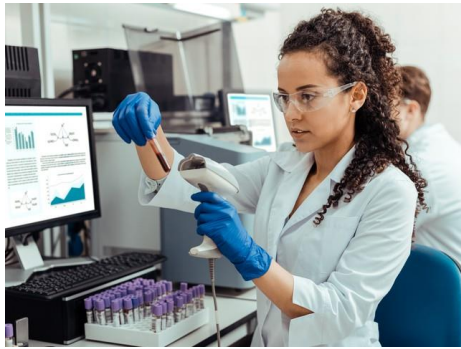


## Investing in Laboratory Health Human Resources

The Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario (MLPAO) is a non-profit health professional organization founded in 1963 with members across the province, advocating on behalf of Medical Laboratory Technologists (MLTs) and Medical Laboratory Assistant/Technicians (MLA/Ts). **Combined, these professionals process and interpret 280+ million lab tests annually and are the fourth largest healthcare profession after doctors, nurses, and pharmacists.**



**Lab professionals test for thousands of diseases and disorders** including early cancer diagnosis, diabetes, heart disease, genetic markers and more.<sup>i</sup> These tests are required to provide diagnostics and comprehensive care to Ontarians for publicly funded cancer screenings, such as mammograms, surgeries and procedures. During a breast biopsy, a small hollow-core needle is used to take a sample of breast tissue, or a sample can also be removed during surgery. The lab processes the sample, and it is examined by a pathologist who will provide a diagnosis.

MLPAO is extremely thankful for the record investments in the 2024 Ontario Budget for medical laboratory professionals. The Budget includes a commitment to add an additional 700 education seats for Medical Laboratory Technologists, Medical Lab Technicians, Medical Radiation and Imaging Technologists, and Medical Radiation Extenders. The Ontario government has also expanded the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant to include Medical Laboratory Technology and Medical Laboratory Science Programs that allow eligible students in programs at Cambrian and St. Clair Colleges to receive financial aid during their studies.

The Ontario government has made significant investments to expand the number of community surgical and diagnostic centres across the province to make it easier and faster to connect people to publicly funded surgeries and procedures. The eligibility age of self-referral for publicly funded mammograms through the Ontario Breast Screening Program will also be lowered from 50 to 40 in fall 2024. **MLPAO recognizes the need for innovative solutions to support patients across Ontario with wait times however the Ontario government needs to consider the additional pressure this places on labs.**

**While MLPAO applauds an expansion to the number of publicly funded cancer screening, surgeries and procedures that will be performed each year, additional investments for Ontario's medical laboratory system are also required to ensure Ontarians can receive timely access to tests and results that impact their care.**

**70% of all medical decisions rely on lab results** and there is a significant testing demand due to an aging population, expansion of preventive medicine, and new pathogens. Upon completion of the didactic phase of their education, MLT students are required in most cases to invest the last two semesters of their program in a clinical setting paid for at their own expense. After the successful completion of this internship/placement, they are then approved to challenge the national certification exam and register with the College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Ontario (CMLTO). CMLTO's data shows that in 2023, 217 MLTs resigned and an additional 891 MLTs are over the age of 60 and are eligible for retirement. Overall, the data shows **42% of MLTs will be in the eligible to retire category in the next 2-4 years** at the age of 55 and will be eligible for the Healthcare of Ontario Pension Plan.

# MLPAO has three main recommendations for the Ontario government to include in the 2025 Budget to further invest in the province's medical labs.

## 1. \$17.8M (over three years) for Clinical Placements and Preceptors

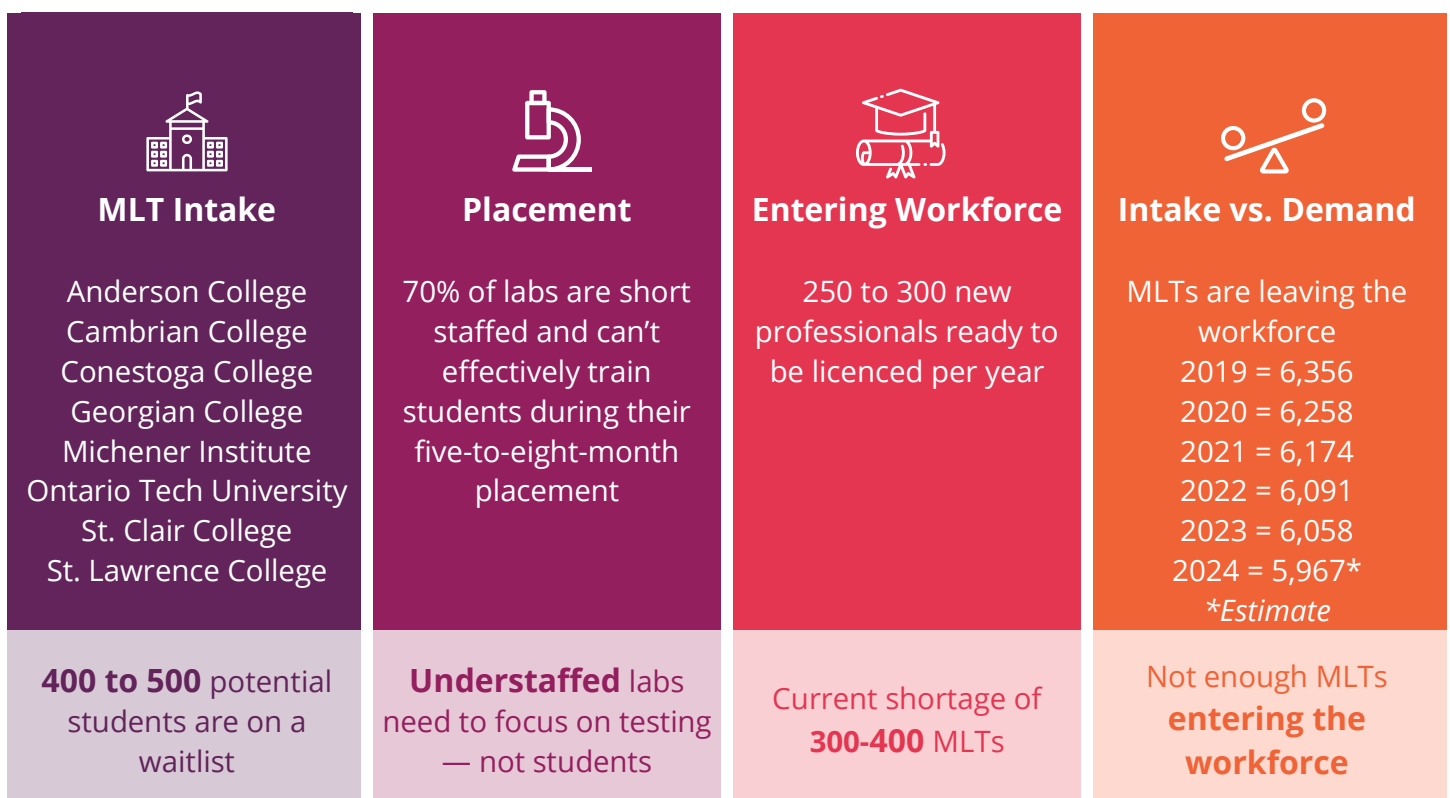
Estimated funding will be used to support clinical placements for students - **three years at \$10,000 - \$20,000 / student for a total of \$12M to educate 1,145 students.** This funding will be used to provide clinical placements for approximately 350 students in 2025, 370 in 2026, and 425 in 2027. Employers will use \$5.8M to hire additional staff to support students in a preceptor role, (similar to other health professionals), to provide hands-on training opportunities.

## 2. \$12M for MLT Education Programs to Develop Simulation Laboratories (Approx. \$2M Per School)

Simulation-based learning will allow students to **complete some disciplines (technical skills) by simulation while reducing the time needed in the clinical placement** and in turn increase the number of labs able to take students for placements. An expansion of simulation training to all publicly funded post-secondary Medical Laboratory Sciences programs will ensure lab professionals have the proper knowledge, skills and competency for all types of scenarios.

## 3. Expand the Learn and Stay Grant to More MLT Education Programs

The Learn and Stay Grant was a welcome investment in the 2023 Budget and will help with MLT retention in Eastern and Northern Ontario. The government is encouraged to **expand the Learn and Stay Grant** to include MLT programs at Conestoga College, Georgian College, Humber College, Ontario Tech University, and St. Lawrence College as these programs train MLTs who work in Eastern, Northern and Southwestern Ontario to further aid with retention in these parts of the province.



## The Impact of MLT Shortages

The MLPAO conducted a survey in winter 2024<sup>ii</sup> and in summer 2024<sup>iii</sup> to assess the staffing challenges facing Ontario labs and the results show **further action is required to address the health human resource shortages that labs face**. The volume of work in 88% of Ontario labs has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic and labs are struggling to keep pace with the workload. In addition to being short-staffed, 42% of MLTs<sup>iv</sup> are approaching retirement in the next few years, which will further exacerbate the staffing shortages resulting in delays to turnaround times.

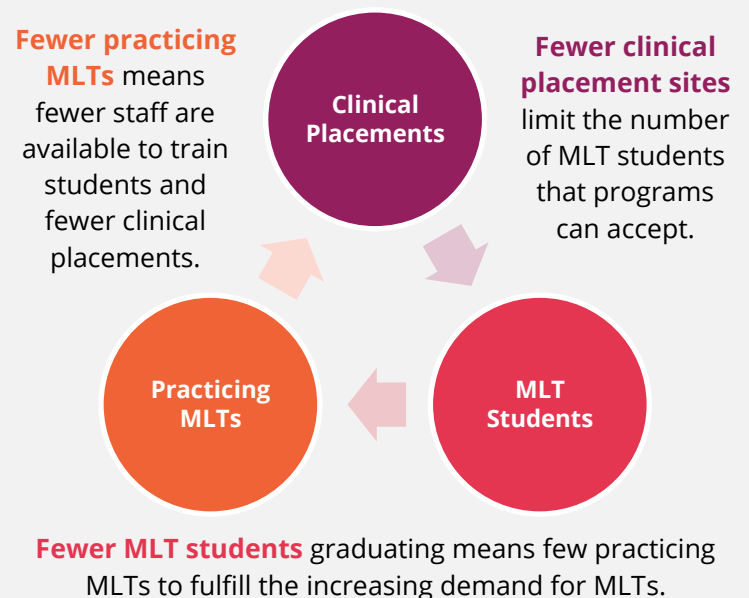
*The winter and summer 2024 surveys show:*

- 83% of Ontario labs continue to experience MLT shortages and **70% of respondents have said MLT staffing shortages have stayed the same or worsened**.
- **67% reported MLT shortages are affecting testing turnaround times** in their respective labs (58% in 2023).
- **28% reported they have eliminated tests from their testing menu due to staffing shortages** which increases the turnaround time as samples must be sent to another lab.
- **20% reported an increase in the number of occurrences/adverse events related to wait times, delays in diagnostics, treatment or surgery**, where MLT shortages were a contributing factor.
- Cancer Care Ontario has established 14-day turnaround time standards for surgical pathology results. 44% of pathology labs that responded to the survey reported that they are only **meeting this turnaround time in less than 50% of their cases**.

### #1: Clinical Placements and Preceptors - \$17.8M (over three years)

Clinical placements are a **requirement for MLT students to complete before they can graduate** from their program and provides crucial hands-on experience that bridges theoretical learning with practical application.

Prospective workplaces do not have the required human resources to train students, as MLTs are focused on interpreting tests and providing results and employers are unable to commit personnel to train clinical placement students while they are understaffed. These employers have expressed a desire to train new MLTs but are currently unable to do so which limits placement sites, restricting seats in MLT programs, which in turn reduces the number of practicing MLTs, intensifying the shortage.



Estimated funding will be used to support clinical placements for students - **three years at \$10,000 - \$20,000 / student for a total of \$12M to educate 1,145 students.** This funding will be used to provide clinical placements for approximately 350 students in 2025, 370 in 2026, and 425 in 2027. This will enable publicly funded academic institutions and hospital systems to partner with each other to develop strategies and training initiatives to address their communities' unique needs. **Employers will use \$5.8M to hire 125 preceptors, which could include part-time or recently retired MLTs, to support students.** Their role will focus on supervising MLT students during their clinical rotations and ensure supports are provided to students while they bridge the gap between theoretical and clinical practice.

**Funding for clinical placements is urgently needed to ensure clinical partner sites are able to provide hands-on training opportunities for MLT students. After the successful completion of their internship/placement and school exams, graduates are then able to complete the national certification exam and register with CMLTO.**

*The funding would be allocated as follows:*

**Urban areas:** This would include cities with populations over 100,000 such as Toronto, Hamilton, Kingston, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, and Sudbury. Clinical placements are anticipated to cost \$10,000 for each student.

**Rural areas:** This would include cities with populations under 100,000 such as Timmins, North Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Mattawa, Stratford, Napanee, and Owen Sound. Clinical placements are anticipated to cost \$12,000 for each student.

**Remote areas:** This would include regions such as Moosonee, Sioux Lookout, Kenora, and Manitowadge. Clinical placements are anticipated to cost \$15,000 – 20,000 for each student.

**Funding for clinical placements and preceptors can be an additional solution to complement the Learn and Stay Grant** to help MLT recruitment and retention in the East, North and Southwest Regions of Ontario. This will allow the province to increase the number of placements in under-served, rural, and remote areas where placements may have been discontinued due to the lack of resources and staff. The government should also consider additional funding for signing and retention bonuses to encourage medical lab professionals to work and live in rural and remote communities. This will help to bolster the province's MLT workforce where they are needed. Clinical placement funding will assist students with the clinical practicum, lab resources and supplies, and living expenses such as food, housing, and transportation to their workplaces.

**#2: \$12M for MLT Education Programs to Develop Simulation Labs (Approx. \$2M Per School)**

There is a need for more simulation-based learning in the Ontario labs sector. **Many labs do not have the five specialty areas of lab medicine that students are required to complete during clinical placement** and are thereby limited or excluded from taking students for clinical placement. This is especially true in mid-sized urban, rural, and remote labs. **Simulation-based learning will allow students to complete some disciplines by simulation and the remainder of their clinical placement in a lab which will increase the number of employers able to take students for placements.** Funding will be used to support six Ontario publicly funded post-secondary schools to develop simulation labs for Medical

Laboratory Science programs at Cambrian College, Georgian College, Humber College, Ontario Tech University, St. Clair College, and St. Lawrence College.

The report, [Hidden and Understaffed: Exploring Canadian MLTs' Pandemic Stressors and Lessons Learned](#), discusses challenges the medical lab profession experienced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and solutions to mitigate these issues in the future. The pandemic placed significant burden on MLTs who reported increased rates of laboratory errors due to the high influx of testing and newer and less-experienced staff who replaced senior MLTs who retired during the pandemic. This increased the burden on the remaining staff members, as they had the added responsibility of training the new MLTs in addition to their existing workload, further straining an already-stretched workforce.

**Dedicated funding for Ontario MLT education programs to develop simulation labs will ensure MLTs have the proper knowledge, skills and competency for all types of scenarios.**

This will help to **enhance student learning while decreasing the need for lengthy apprenticeships**. B.C.'s Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training provided one-time funding to Thompson Rivers University to support expansion of their Respiratory Therapy Program to enable the school to purchase skills-training equipment including a new ventilator to support student learning.<sup>v</sup> Likewise, the University of British Columbia is adding "high-fidelity" simulation labs as part of their redevelopment of the school's health sciences facilities. This will enable nursing students to learn the required skills and competencies for their professional nursing practice before gaining experience in a clinical practice.<sup>vi</sup>

### #3: Expand the Learn and Stay Grant to more MLT Education Programs

The Learn and Stay Grant was a welcome investment in the 2023 Budget and will help with MLT retention in Eastern and Northern Ontario. The government is encouraged to **expand the Learn and Stay Grant** to include MLT programs at Conestoga College, Georgian College, Humber College, Ontario Tech University, and St. Lawrence College as these programs train MLTs who work in Eastern, Northern and Southwestern Ontario as this will **support healthcare in rural and remote communities**. This will complement the funding that MLT students at Cambrian College and St. Clair College are eligible to apply for through the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant and will provide a more comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy.

**Expanding the Learn and Stay Grant to more MLT education programs will support healthcare in rural and remote communities in Eastern, Northern and Southwestern Ontario.**

### For more information, please contact:

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<sup>i</sup> [List of the thousands of diseases and disorders lab professionals test for](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [Report: Patient Care Impacted by Delay in Laboratory Testing](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [Pulse Check: MLT Shortage Looms Large](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [2023 CMLTO Annual Report](#)

<sup>v</sup> [New Fast-Track Seats for BC Respiratory Therapists](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [UBC Clinical Skills and Simulation Lab](#)