

WRITTEN BY ROBIN TRESS

HOW WE'RE FLIPPING THE SCRIPT ON UNIVERSAL PHARMACARE



EVERYWHERE I GO THESE DAYS, I MEET PEOPLE WHO ARE AMAZED AT THE IDEA THAT WE COULD HAVE UNIVERSAL, PUBLIC PHARMACARE.

While on tour for our pharmacare town halls, we stopped for breakfast at a greasy spoon in London, Ontario, before heading to our next destination. We sat on the patio of the diner, and our server asked where we were from and what we were all doing in town. When we told her about our town hall tour and the prospect of a public, universal pharmacare program on the horizon, she was amazed. She told us about a loved one who was crushed by the cost of insulin. Vi Bui, our regional organizer for Ontario and Quebec, quickly ran to the car and got a few window signs and fliers for our new friend to put up in the diner, and our server took them gladly.

Three men at the next table had overheard our conversation and asked some questions. “What is this pharmacare thing? Is it really possible to get in the foreseeable future? And it would save money across the board?”

“Why don’t we have it already!?” one of the men continued. “I didn’t even know this was on the table, and I’m so glad you told us about it.”

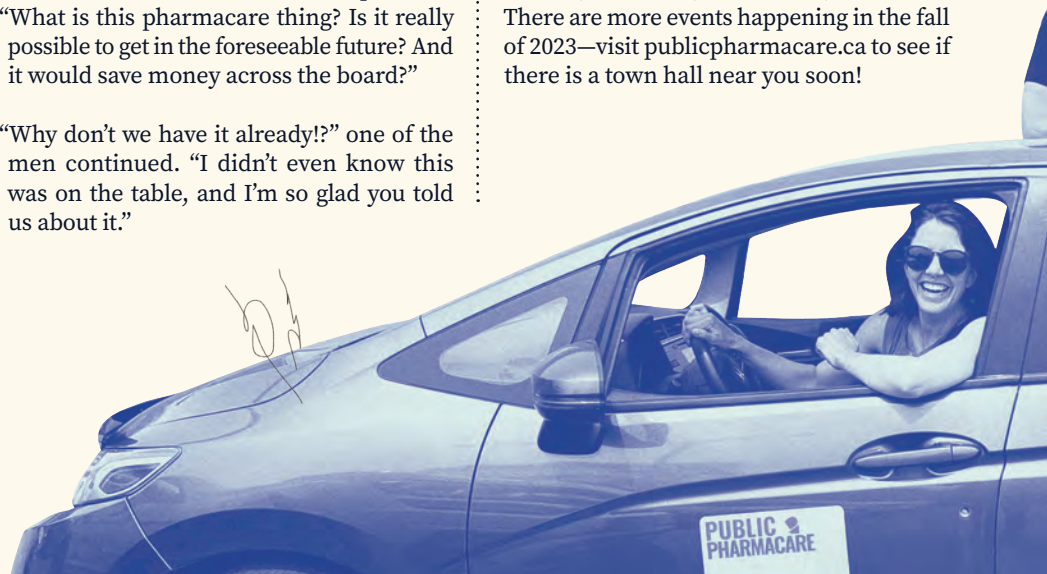
Whether people were learning about pharmacare for the first time or had been in the fight for pharmacare for years, everyone we met was excited about the possibility that universal coverage for essential medicines was on the horizon.

Later that week in Waterloo, we had brunch at the home of two of our dear Kitchener-Waterloo chapter members David and Mary, and we listened to our friend Marilyn Hay on the radio talking about the previous night’s town hall. Just outside the house, workers fixing the driveway saw the sign on our car and asked about what we were doing. One of them said he was a PhD candidate in health care policy and had been advocating for pharmacare for a long time.

Everywhere we went, we met people struggling with high drug costs, aghast that the multiple Liberal promises to implement pharmacare haven’t been enacted yet or delighted that Canada was even considering implementing such a progressive and foundational program.

From Antigonish, N.S., to Powell River, B.C., we’re organizing for pharmacare

We have hosted town halls in Halifax, Charlottetown, Fredericton, Antigonish, Guelph, Toronto, London, Kitchener-Waterloo, Hamilton, Ottawa, Montreal, Victoria, Vancouver, Powell River, and Nelson. There are more events happening in the fall of 2023—visit publicpharmacare.ca to see if there is a town hall near you soon!





Following these town halls, we've earned a steady drumbeat of media coverage on all these events, and great op-eds by panelists throughout. As attention on the issue of pharmacare grows, news stories featuring our staff, chapters, and our allies at other organizations are growing.

We've learned a lot through the town halls, from talking to the people in attendance and hearing what they shared about the depth and breadth of the impact that high drug prices are having and discovering new ways to tweak and hone our strategy.

One of our panelists in Toronto, Syed Hussan from the Migrant Rights Network, put an important strategic approach into words for us: educate, agitate, inoculate, organize.

Because pharmacare is an issue that the pharmaceutical industry has purposefully confused and obscured over the



years, we've done a lot of work to educate the public on how to respond to prevailing doubts. Opponents of pharmacare have been asking, "won't it cost a lot? Are you sure a public project will give better coverage than private insurance? Won't conservative provincial governments get in the way?"

Preparing activists and town hall attendees to hear these questions and rebut them has been an important feature of the town hall tour and the campaign more broadly.

Moving hearts and minds

A year ago, pharmacare was mainly discussed in the media as a complicated issue about formularies and insurance plans, to be understood only by public health experts and policy wonks. Now, through the generous collective effort of hundreds of people, we've shown that it's a story about people, profit, inequality, and public health care.

We've worked hard to broaden the fight and demonstrate that pharmacare is a fight that affects everyone—more than 11 per cent of people in Canada can't take their medication because they can't afford it, and a third more struggle to make ends meet due to the price of their medicine. In our town halls we heard from immigrants, women and gender-diverse people, people

THE FIGHT TO WIN PUBLIC PHARMACARE STARTS WITH ALL OF US. GET INVOLVED NOW: PUBLICPHARMACARE.CA.

with diabetes and other chronic illnesses, people experiencing homelessness, parents, doctors, nurses, young people, old people. These people and their communities are impacted by the high cost of drugs in various ways but all have one common message: we need public pharmacare, and we need it now.

Consistently, we're finding that the power of personal stories, tied to the overall demand for public pharmacare now, is moving hearts and minds. Hundreds of Council of Canadians activists are now out in their communities, canvassing outside pharmacies and at community hubs, meeting with MPs, and sharing window signs with their neighbours. In all these conversations, personal stories paired with our shared political demands are consistently bringing more people into the campaign and building our collective power. **CP**

Robin Tress was the acting Co-Executive Director and Director of Campaigns at the Council of Canadians from September 2022 until July 2023.



Left: Robin Tress, Nikolas Barry-Shaw, and Vi Bui from the Council of Canadians on tour for public pharmacare