

April 17, 2019

The Honourable Christine Elliott
Deputy Premier and Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
10th Floor, Hepburn Block
80 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2C4

Dear Minister Elliott:

Re: Urgent provincial action needed to address the potential health and social harms from the ongoing modernization of alcohol retail sales in Ontario

On behalf of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) Board of Health, I am writing to urge the Government of Ontario to develop a comprehensive provincial alcohol strategy to mitigate harms and monitor the health impacts of increasing access and availability of alcohol in Ontario.

Alcohol costs to the individual and society are significant. In 2014, Ontario spent \$5.34 billion on alcohol-related harms, including \$1.5 billion for healthcare and \$1.3 billion for criminal justice.¹ Since 2015, alcohol use has contributed to more than 43,000 emergency room visits and 66 hospitalizations per day, a significant and avoidable burden on Ontario's healthcare system.²

It is well established that increased alcohol availability leads to increased consumption and alcohol-related harms. A comprehensive, provincially led alcohol strategy can help mitigate the potential harms of alcohol use as the government liberalizes access. Such a strategy should include:

- Strong policies to minimize the potential health and social harms of alcohol consumption;
- An improved monitoring system to track alcohol-related harms;
- Rigorous enforcement of alcohol marketing regulations, and;
- Public education and awareness campaigns aimed at changing attitudes and social norms around consumption.

The Ontario Government has committed to ensure the health and safety of our communities as it increases the availability of alcohol; however, recent changes in the way alcohol is sold and the 2019 Ontario Budget 'Protecting What Matters Most' ³ released on April 11, 2019 suggest that economic interests are superseding the health and well-being of Ontarians and further diminishes the likelihood of meeting the goal of ending hallway medicine. Recent changes that raise the potential for increased alcohol-related harms include reducing the minimum retail price of beer to \$1.00, halting the annual inflation-indexed increase in the beer tax, and extending the hours of sale for alcohol retail outlets. This is in conjunction with the anticipated changes of legislation permitting municipalities to designate public areas for consumption of alcohol, advertising happy hour and creating a tailgating permit for eligible sporting events including post-secondary events.

The SMDHU Board of Health has on numerous occasions sent advocacy letters to the provincial government to support healthy alcohol policy, most recently in 2017, calling on the government to

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prioritize the health and well-being of Ontarians by enacting a comprehensive, evidence-based alcohol strategy.

We believe it is possible to create a healthy alcohol culture in Ontario that balances interests in public health, government revenue, economic development, and consumer preferences without sacrificing the health of Ontarians. We support both the Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health and Association of Local Public Health Agencies' request to ensure such a balance, and we thereby encourage the government to develop a provincial alcohol strategy that incorporates health goals.^{4,5} This would include a monitoring and evaluation plan to measure intended and unintended impacts of policy change. Now is the time for Ontario to take leadership and address the harms of alcohol use in our province.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

ORIGINAL Signed By:

Anita Dubeau
Chair, Board of Health

cc. Hon. Vic Fedeli, Minister of Finance
Ken Hughes, Special Advisor for the Beverage Alcohol Review
Doug Downey, MPP Barrie-Springwater-Oro-Medonte
Jill Dunlop, MPP Simcoe North
Andrea Khanjin, MPP Barrie-Innisfil
Norman Miller, MPP Parry Sound-Muskoka
Hon. Caroline Mulroney, MPP York-Simcoe
Jim Wilson, MPP Simcoe-Grey
Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health for Ontario
Loretta Ryan, alPHa Executive Director
Ontario Boards of Health

References

1. The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. (2018) [Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms in the Provinces and Territories \(2007–2014\)](#)
2. Ontario Public Health Association. (2018) [The Facts: Alcohol Harms and Costs in Ontario](#).
3. Ministry of Finance of the Ontario Government, [2019 Ontario Budget Protecting What Matters Most](#), April 11, 2019 , Honourable Victor Fedeli
4. Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health, [Re: Alcohol Choice & Convenience Roundtable Discussions](#) [Letter written March 14, 2019 to Honorable Vic Fedeli].
5. Association of Local Public Health Agencies, [Re: Alcohol Choice & Convenience Roundtable Discussions](#) [Letter written March 8, 2019 to Honorable Vic Fedeli].