

June 7, 2025

To the Hamilton City Council,

My name is Dr. Sheila Harms and I am a Professor and Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist from McMaster University. I currently work at McMaster Children's Hospital in the Emergency Department, providing emergency mental health care to the youth that experience mental health crises, which include suicidality, drug overdoses, as well as acute forms of mental illness, to mention a few. I have also been involved in medical education leadership for the past 20 years, which has included a commitment to the humanities in medicine. Over my years in practice, the medical humanities, such as opportunities to view and create visual art, has emerged as a critical intervention for our local youth, including those who are well and unwell.

I am writing this letter from the perspective of a local physician and community member who recognizes the critical importance of the Art Gallery of Hamilton (AGH) and am providing this letter of support to advocate for increased financial support from our City Council. I have provided a rationale below to support this request.

Our local AGH is prestigious across the Canadian landscape with an expansive collection of both Canadian and international art, including a permanent collection that speaks to a history of generous donations and investment in the arts. As the third largest art collection in the province and its ranking as one of the five most important art collections in Canada, the AGH is a cultural emblem of Hamilton's history. A great deal of effort and commitment has shaped the work of the AGH which is beyond impressive, particularly as it relates to the health of Hamiltonians.

As a physician and expert in mental health, I can speak to the importance of creativity and engagement with the visual arts, in particular, as both an evidence-based treatment for youth who have experienced trauma and as intervention to reduce mental health stigma. But my experience with art and its transforming, healing properties go well beyond the domain of mental health. Globally, physicians are prescribing visits to art galleries to promote wellness, which is currently in short supply given the numerous sociopolitical stressors that are encountered by all Canadians.

The AGH is alive to the health benefits that art can provide and offers Hamiltonians incredible, affordable opportunities such as the Youth Arts Collective, Breaking Through the Vault Poetry Club, Dementia Friendly Days, Artful Moments, QUARTZ (Queer Art Hang), Storytime, and Mindful Drawing in the Gallery. The AGH also runs a number of programs specifically designed for children and families, including Family Fun Days, Family Camp Day, March Break Camp, and Summer Break Camps. The AGH runs tours and events for schools, offering a rich educational experience for over 10,000 students

throughout the region.

Through programs like these, the AGH demonstrates how art has the ability to offer something beyond capsules and hospital beds. Art has the capacity to improve physical and mental health, facilitate social connection, improve emotional functioning, reduce stress and anxiety, and provides a sense of joy and self-awareness.

The AGH building is aging and needs the City of Hamilton to provide financial support to ensure that this institution is maintained and protected for the full benefit of the community. For years, the AGH has been responsible for the costs of maintaining the building and the art collection, even though the City of Hamilton owns the building and shares ownership of the collection. These expenses come out of the AGH's operating budget, which has not had an increase from the City in almost 20 years. If the AGH is to survive, much less thrive and flourish, the City must assume its obligation to bear some of these significant costs to support the building and the maintenance of its extensive collection.

In summary, the work of the AGH highlights the vitality and the beauty that is Hamilton. I trust that the City will provide budgetary support as a point of civic responsibility and as an investment in the wellness of Hamilton's population.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dr. Sheila Harms, MD, FRCPC, PhD  
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