Dear friends,

Alongside the rest of the world, Ontario is grappling with the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Public health experts and governments everywhere have imposed or strongly advised a range of measures to slow the spread of this disease, ranging from physical distancing from other people to enforced quarantine. While these measures are necessary to “flatten the curve,” they also come with attendant risks. As regular routines are upended and in-person social activities and community programming are suspended, it is important that we remain mindful of how essential social and community supports are in these times. This is especially true for those who are already vulnerable.

Research into the effects of relatively short-term quarantine and mandated social distancing, such as during the SARS epidemic of 2003, show that such short-term isolation can have long-term impacts on mental health. People who have been isolated or quarantined experience fear, loneliness, boredom, and anger. In some cases, these feelings led to longer-term negative mental health outcomes including insomnia, mood disorders and posttraumatic stress disorder.\(^1\)\(^2\) Substance abuse, domestic violence, and rates of suicide are reported to rise.\(^3\)\(^4\) Such impacts are most severe for women and for individuals with lower education levels, poorer self-perceived health, and lower emotional support, as well as those who were more economically affected by isolation or quarantine.\(^5\)\(^6\) Conversely, those with denser social networks, better relationships, and someone to share their worries with were less likely to experience adverse outcomes.\(^5\)

In a pandemic, people turn to their trusted healthcare providers for medical advice and treatment. The healthcare system thus becomes an important doorway for people to also access the social services and community supports that are essential to their wellbeing. Community Health Centres and other members of the Alliance for Healthier Communities are keeping health equity at the forefront during this time, checking in on those who are vulnerable, and finding creative alternatives to keep people connected. For example, at Guelph Community Health Centre, healthcare providers are continuing to make social prescribing referrals when needed, and the social prescribing navigator is following up via telephone and virtual appointments. At South Georgian Bay Community Health Centre, community program staff and volunteers are mobilizing to make social calls to program participants in lieu of meeting in person.
The importance of integrating health care and social supports is critical now, and it will continue to be as we recover together from the impacts of COVID-19. It is heartening to hear so many stories of social referrals, community care, mutual aid and caremongering, formal and informal, already underway across local communities, the province, the country and the world.

As you read through the final report of the *Rx: Community* social prescribing pilot, we invite you to consider how you might apply what we’ve learned to your current situation. Think about what you can start doing now, even on a small scale, to support a sense of community belonging and reach out to people who need you in this time of physical distancing and mandated isolation. These interventions can help to protect the long-term health and wellbeing of individuals and families, and build a more equitable and resilient community in the future.

With love and solidarity,

Kate, Sonia, Jen, Sara and the Alliance for Healthier Communities

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