

March 1, 2021

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Bldg Rm 281
Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier Ford:

Re: Provincial Employment Standards Reform for Provision of Paid Sick Days

The Board of Health for the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit is deeply concerned about the absence of paid sick leave standards for workers in the province. As a matter of public health, we urge your government to update the Employment Standards Act, 2000 to include paid sick days for all workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the urgency of paid sick days for curbing the transmission of infectious disease and protecting public health. Legislated paid sick days would allow workers to receive full and uninterrupted income replacement, which is a primary concern for workers in low-wage and precarious employment. Accordingly, we urge your government to consider the following recommendations to contain the spread of infectious disease and protect public health:

1. Update employment standards to require employers to provide at least 7 days of paid emergency leave on a permanent basis.
2. Update employment standards to require employers to provide an additional 14 days of paid emergency leave during public health emergencies.
3. Provide the necessary funding, fiscal relief, and other supports necessary to employers to provide this as needed.

Workplaces with precarious jobs and lack of paid sick leave have become epicenters for COVID-19 infection transmission across the province, as manifested by outbreaks in long-term care homes, farms, food-processing plants, grocery stores, and warehouses. The gap in access to paid sick days and the accompanying burden of COVID-19 continue to disproportionately impact women, low wage and precarious workers, and racialized groups. This reality has been observed across Simcoe Muskoka communities.

Beyond an urgent need to redress these health inequities, the absence of paid sick leave significantly compromises our pandemic response. Our region has been relentless in its fight to contain COVID-19, and most recently, the highly transmissible UK variant. Unfortunately,

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concerns have been voiced in our communities that a lack of paid sick days might act as a disincentive for testing and contribute to employees with insufficient benefits presenting to work sick. COVID-19 outbreak investigations performed by our health unit have found employees going to work symptomatic, even when screening protocols were in place. This has been observed across all sectors, with income (or, lack thereof) appearing to be a common reason motivating such behaviours.

While Federal paid emergency leave is available through the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, the financial support it provides has not proven sufficient, and administrative barriers have precluded timely-enough access. Ultimately, workers without paid sick days are in the difficult position of needing to choose between going to work sick to support themselves and their families or staying at home to adhere to COVID-19 public health measures at considerable financial risk.

Staying home when sick is one of the most effective containment strategies not only for COVID-19, but for infectious diseases more broadly. A 2006 Public Health Agency of Canada report studying gastrointestinal illness shows that workers in high-risk settings — food handling, long-term care and childcare — will continue to work when ill when they cannot afford to take time off. A [2018 study](#) from Swiss Economic Institute's Stefan Pichler and Cornell University's Nicolas Ziebarthin found that cities in the United States with paid sick days saw a 40% reduction in influenza rates during flu waves compared to cities without.¹

In addition, paid sick days support effective immunization uptake. [Evidence shows](#) paid sick days increase vaccination rates. Both workers with paid sick days and their children have higher vaccination rates against the flu, and better access to other preventive health services.² The same might hold for uptake of COVID-19 immunizations.

The gap in access to paid sick days is a longstanding matter of health inequity, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Adequate paid sick days policy in Ontario is urgent and required to protect public health, especially for those in low wage and precarious work who have been most impacted by COVID-19.

Thank you for reviewing this request and we look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

ORIGINAL Signed By:

Anita Dubeau, Chair
Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit Board of Health

AD:cm

cc. Honourable Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Ontario Minister of Health
Honourable Monte McNaughton, Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development
Members of Provincial Parliament for Simcoe and Muskoka
Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Association of Local Public Health Agencies
Ontario Boards of Health

References

¹ Pichler, Stefan and Nicolas R. Ziebarth. 2015. "The Pros and Cons of Sick Pay Schemes: Testing for Contagious Presenteeism and Shirking Behavior." Upjohn Institute Working Paper 15-239. Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. <https://doi.org/10.17848/wp15-239>

² Decent Work & Health Network. 2020. *Before it's too late: How to close the paid sick days gap during COVID-19 and beyond*. Retrieved online from https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/dwhn/pages/135/attachments/original/1604082294/DWHN_BeforeItsTooLate.pdf?1604082294