May 1, 2019

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building, Queen’s Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1
Sent via e-mail: doug.ford@pc.ola.org

Dear Premier Ford:

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 Peterborough Public Health (PPH) Board of Health, I am writing to call on the Government of Ontario to develop a comprehensive, province-wide strategy to minimize alcohol-related harm and support safer consumption of alcohol in the province.

Alcohol is a legal psychoactive substance, not a regular commodity. As with other psychoactive substances, alcohol causes changes in perception and behaviour and its use exists on a spectrum from beneficial, to problematic, to chronic dependence. Recent statistics show that approximately 21% of Ontarians who drink exceed the low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines, a key modifiable risk factor of chronic diseases and injuries and their associated health care costs.

The costs of alcohol are significant. In 2014, Ontario spent $5.3 billion on alcohol-related harms; more than any other substance including tobacco, cannabis and opioids. In the same year net revenue from alcohol amounted to only $3.9 billion, representing a net annual loss of over $1.4 billion. 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.

It is well established that increasing access to alcohol is related to a subsequent increase in alcohol use, which in turn increases the potential for rising harms and costs. A comprehensive provincial alcohol strategy can help support a culture of moderation and mitigate the potential harms and costs of alcohol use. Such a strategy should include:

- Strong policies to minimize the potential health and social harms of alcohol consumption;
- Strategies to enhance alcohol treatment and harm-reduction programs;
- 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 putting more money in people’s pockets, and cutting hospital wait times and ending hallway healthcare as part of the 2019 Ontario Budget. Given the significant costs associated with alcohol consumption, which are shouldered by both individual taxpayers and government systems, these commitments risk being undermined by recent and anticipated changes to provincial alcohol policy, including: reducing the minimum retail price of beer to $1.00, halting the annual inflation-indexed increase in the beer tax, extending the hours of sale for alcohol retail outlets, 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.

We echo the call from the Canadian Centre for Substance Use Research which, in the 2019 review of alcohol policies across Canada, identified that “in light of the on-going expansion of alcohol availability in Ontario the development and implementation of an alcohol-specific government-endorsed strategy should be given high priority”. In doing so, Ontario would join Alberta, Nova Scotia, and Nunavut as leaders in this important domain of alcohol policy.

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. 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

Councillor Kathryn Wilson
Chair, Board of Health

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cc: Hon. Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
Hon. Vic Fedeli, Minister of Finance
Ken Hughes, Special Advisor for the Beverage Alcohol Review
Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health for Ontario
Local MPPs
Association of Local Public Health Agencies
Ontario Boards of Health

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Serving the residents of Curve Lake and Hiawatha First Nations, and the County and City of Peterborough