May 21, 2019

The Honorable Christine Elliott
Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
Hepburn Block 10th Floor
80 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1E9

Dear Minister Elliott:

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 Windsor-Essex County Board of Health we are writing to you in support of Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit’s request to the Government of Ontario to develop a comprehensive provincial alcohol strategy to mitigate harms and monitor the health impacts of the increasing access and availability of alcohol in Ontario.

Annual costs directly attributed to alcohol-related harms in the form of health care, law enforcement, lost productivity, premature mortality and other alcohol-related problems, are estimated at $5.3 billion, contributing to a significant burden on Ontario’s health care system. Research evidence shows that policy tools designed to influence drinking levels and patterns can reduce disease, disability, death and social disruption from alcohol.

It is well established that increased alcohol availability leads to increased consumption and alcohol–related harms. We agree with the SMDHU’s belief that a comprehensive, provincially led alcohol strategy can help mitigate the potential harms of alcohol use, and thereby encourage the government to develop a provincial strategy to include education and awareness campaigns, enforcement of alcohol marketing regulations and improved monitoring systems to track alcohol-related harms.

The Windsor-Essex County Health Unit thanks you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Gary McNamara, Chair
Chair, Board of Health

Theresa Marentette
Chief Executive Officer

Encl: SMDHU Letter to Christine Elliott, MOHLTC
C: Premier Doug Ford
Ontario Boards of Health
Loretta Ryan, Association of Local Public Health Units
Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health, MOHLTC
Hon. Vic Fedeli, Minister of Finance
Ken Hughes, Special Advisor for the Beverage Alcohol Review
WECHU Board of Health
Local MPP’s – Percy Hatfield, Lisa Gretzky, Taras Natyshak, Rick Nicholls
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. 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 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’ 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
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