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(ODPH)

Ontario Society of Physical Activity
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(OSPAPPH)

The Hon. Rod Phillips
Ontario Minister of Finance
Frost Building South
7 Queen's Park Cres. E 7th Floor,
Toronto, ON
M7A 1Y7

November 5, 2019

Dear Minister Phillips:

Re: Public Health Suggestions for Alcohol Policy Changes in Ontario

I am writing on behalf of the members of the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) Alcohol Workgroup, a volunteer led group of public health experts and practitioners from across Ontario. We congratulate you on your new role as Ontario's Finance Minister and urge you to consider our evidence-informed recommendations as you develop alcohol policy for Ontario.

We have valued being part of face-to-face stakeholder consultations organized by your Ministry on this issue. We appreciated the opportunity to discuss, with other sectors, the public health implications of expanding the sale and distribution of alcohol in Ontario and offer suggestions.

Since your appointment, new Ontario-based alcohol-related research and reports have been released. We wanted to highlight the opportunities for reducing public health risks and harms, as well as health care and other costs associated with policy changes.

Increase in Alcohol-Related Emergency Department (ED) Visits in Ontario

Two recent research studies show a concerning rise in alcohol-related ED visits in Ontario. One study looked at ED visits between 2003 and 2016 and revealed that the largest increase in visits were among women and young adults. Another study found that since the expansion of alcohol sales into grocery stores in 2015, there were 24,000 more people admitted to emergency departments compared to the two previous years.

These findings are consistent with earlier research done by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) which showed alcohol-related harms increase when the sale and distribution of alcohol is expanded. CAMH's research points to the critical role that availability, pricing and marketing play in consumption patterns and increased risks and harms.

Ontario Chamber of Commerce Calls for Public Education

We were encouraged that our colleagues at the Ontario Chamber of Commerce recognized in their July 2019 alcohol report the potential health and social harms associated with increased alcohol availability. Among their recommendations, they called on the Government of Ontario to:

- “partner with relevant stakeholders ...like OPHA to promote Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines and develop comprehensive and targeted public education campaigns that focus on increasing awareness of long-term and acute health risks”; and
- “collect data to assess the potential impact of beverage alcohol sales reform and use this data to make evidence-based decisions on public health risk mitigation and/or further reform.”

While most Ontarians are familiar with Canada's Food Guide, few know that there are Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines let alone follow them. Investment in a public education campaign is needed, and public health is well positioned to work with your Ministry and other stakeholders to make this happen. As noted by CAMH's recently released Alcohol Policy Framework, education alone cannot reduce the mounting societal costs which currently outweigh the revenue being generated (costs outweighed revenue by 1.4 billion in 2014). Other measures such as a comprehensive provincial alcohol strategy and dedicating a portion of alcohol revenue to prevention and treatment are also needed.

As you assess future alcohol policy changes, we urge you to keep in mind the public health impacts. We welcome the opportunity to meet members of your team to explore ways that we can work together to promote a culture of moderation and mitigate the harms and health care and other costs caused by the increased availability of alcohol and its problematic use. We will be following up and requesting a meeting to discuss how we may assist you. Thank you for your consideration of this letter and our future requests to meet.

Sincerely,



Pegeen Walsh
Executive Director
OPHA



Cathy Edwards
Co-Chair, OPHA’s Alcohol Workgroup



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Co-Chair, OPHA’s Alcohol Workgroup

C.c. Mr. Stan Cho, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Finance
The Honourable Christine Elliott, Ontario’s Minister of Health
Dr. David Williams, Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health