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September 11, 2019

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The Honourable Christine Elliott
Minister of Health
College Park 5th Floor
777 Bay St.
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Dear Honourable Christine Elliott:

Re: Expanding alcohol retail outlets

The Government of Ontario continues to outline their plans to increase the accessibility of beverage alcohol in Ontario. Recently, the province announced plans to introduce legislation to end the near monopoly on beer sales and expand alcohol sales to corner, big-box, and more grocery stores, resulting in more retail outlets. Research has long established that increasing access to alcohol is related to a subsequent increase in alcohol use and, in turn, alcohol related harms (e.g., alcohol-related diseases, injuries, violence, crime, and traffic crashes). Therefore, this proposed change to legislation is concerning considering alcohol use is already a leading preventable cause of morbidity and mortality in Ontario.

Where alcohol privatization and deregulation has occurred elsewhere in Canada (e.g. Alberta and British Columbia), alcohol availability has risen significantly, with subsequent increases in consumption and related harms.^{1,2,3} Additionally, following the 2015 partial deregulation of alcohol sales in Ontario, increases in the number of alcohol outlets and longer average hours of operation were positively associated with increased emergency department visits attributable to alcohol.⁴ Alcohol costs to the individual and society are significant. A recently published document shows that alcohol costs Ontario \$5.34 Billion for healthcare, lost productivity, criminal justice and other direct costs.⁵

Furthermore, it is important to consider that the impacts of increased alcohol availability may disproportionately impact vulnerable populations. In British Columbia, privatization is associated to reduced compliance with age of sale policies, which can be observed by the low rates of compliance in privatized stores in comparison to government stores.⁶ The implication is that the sale of alcohol becomes easier for underage drinkers, increasing the risk of alcohol-related harms for a population that is already considered especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of alcohol.

We are requesting the Ontario government consider the impact of increasing the number of retail outlets on the health and safety of Ontarians before moving forward with more legislative changes.

We also request the Ontario Government consider the following recommendations proposed by the Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health and The Centre for Addiction and Mental

Health to mitigate the potential harms associated with new policy and regulatory changes to increase alcohol availability in Ontario. We believe it is possible to create a culture of lower risk alcohol use in Ontario that balances interests in public health, government revenue, economic development and consumer preference.

Some measures we request be implemented include:

- Regulate retail availability, including the density, location, hours of sale, and access restrictions.
- Give municipalities the authority to restrict outlet density and hours and days of sale.
- Conduct a risk-based assessment for every tailgating event.
- Ensure operational compliance by expanding the current Mystery Shopper Program to encompass bi-annual visits to every alcohol outlet with publicly reported penalties that escalate with repeat offences.
- Conduct annual education visits to retail outlets.
- Implement pricing policies that will increase provincial revenue while also reducing alcohol-related harms.

Now is the time for Ontario to take leadership and address the harms of alcohol use. Therefore, as outlined in the government's report, we are interested in ensuring the government work with public health experts to ensure increasing convenience does not lead to increased social and healthcare costs related to alcohol. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Larry Martin
Chair, Board of Health

- c. The Honourable Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
Ernie Hardeman, MPP, Oxford
Jeff Yurek, MPP, Elgin-Middlesex-London
Pegeen Walsh, Executive Director, Ontario Public Health Association
Loretta Ryan, Executive Director, Association of Local Public Health Agencies
Association of Local Public Health Agencies
Ontario Boards of Health
Area municipalities served by Southwestern Public Health

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