**Sample Op Ed**

**Alcohol: Ontario's Other Drug Problem**

The opioid crisis and the legalization of cannabis have garnered significant news coverage over the past two years. Indeed, these are major public health issues and we commend the Ontario Government’s actions and plans to address them. However, Ontario's other major drug problem is being overlooked. This is a drug that is more widely used and in fact widely marketed to ensure greater access, convenience and choice.

Alcohol is a leading risk factor for death, disease and disability in Ontario and plays a significant role in social disorder, violence, and crime. While the majority of Ontario adults drink within low risk guidelines, about a quarter engage in high risk drinking and nearly 1-in-10 alcohol users report binge drinking weekly. While alcohol sales continue to increase, more than $5-billion is spent annually in health, enforcement and other costs—well above the revenue generated.

By July of this year, a total of 206 additional grocery store outlets will be licensed to sell beer, wine and cider in Ontario. On-site brewery stores have tripled since 2013 and it is now possible to purchase wine and cider at Farmers’ Markets, and directly purchase alcohol through LCBO’s online platform. We know from research that making alcohol more available will increase consumption and alcohol-related problems. It is important for us to ask if the Government of Ontario's intensive drive to ‘modernize’ the retail sale of alcohol in Ontario is worth it.

To address the increased availability of alcohol, the Ontario Government committed to develop a comprehensive Alcohol Policy to address the health harms of alcohol use and to promote responsible use. That announcement was made in December 2015, and we continue to wait for the Government to fulfill its promise.

Alcohol is part of the fabric of our lives. We use it to socialize and to celebrate. It is widely marketed as a normal part of our Canadian lifestyle, paired with food, family and friends. In the minds of most, alcohol is not seen as a harmful drug. However, ignoring alcohol-related harms perpetuates its elevated status in society and prevents taking measures to reduce its negative impact. A comprehensive, provincially led alcohol strategy can make a difference. It can support public education and awareness about the harms of alcohol and maintain and strengthen key alcohol policy measures proven to minimize harm—including minimum pricing, restrictions on marketing and limiting availability. A provincial alcohol strategy can balance the demand for convenience with the need for promoting responsible use and protecting health.

It’s tough to generate concern about Ontario’s other drug problem, as the harms caused by alcohol are not always as immediate and readily visible. Regulating a legal, psychoactive drug that poses serious health risks is challenging. With the legalization of cannabis on the horizon, we may be facing a situation where the drug posing the greatest risk will have the least restrictions and the greatest access. Ontario’s local Boards of Heath, public health units and community partners continue to work to minimize the harms from alcohol, while the Government appears to be reneging on its commitment to protect the health of Ontarians. Instead, recent policy changes are enabling the alcohol industry to increase the sale of our favourite drug under the guise of 'modernization.” Provincial leadership on this issue is long overdue.