

April 26, 2013

Hon. Kathleen Wynne
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building, Room 281
Toronto ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier,

On behalf of the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) and the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa), we are writing to provide you with some feedback on the 2012 report from the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario – “Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario.”

Together, our two associations have nearly 90 years of combined experience providing leadership in the provincial public health system. As not-for-profit member-based organizations we represent 36 local boards of health and hundreds of public and community health professionals in Ontario. Our associations have come together to form a single ‘Health Equity Work Group’ to address inequities in the health of Ontarians from a systems perspective.

We commend your government for its commitment in the recent Throne Speech to ensuring a fair society by stating there will be an “opportunity for all without letting anyone slip through the cracks”. We are also very pleased to hear your commitment to improving the quality of life for Ontarians living in poverty such as increasing opportunities for those on social assistance and ensuring citizens have a safe, secure and affordable place to live.

Moving forward immediately on some of the recommendations of the Brighter Prospects report will have a significant impact on the health and well-being of people on social assistance. In particular, recommendations to increase social assistance rates for single people on Ontario Works, to increase asset limits, to raise the level of earnings exemptions before clawbacks are implemented, to provide a 50% exemption for child support payments, and to improve employment supports should be implemented without delay.

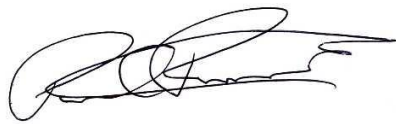
We have concerns that other recommendations, such as the elimination of the Special Diet Allowance, new requirements of ‘Pathways to Employment’ for people with disabilities, and new rate structures based on shared accommodation could have a significant negative impact on specific vulnerable groups. Before any of these measures are implemented it is essential that a careful analysis of their impact is carried out.

The recently released annual report by Dr. Arlene King, Chief Medical Officer of Health, "Maintaining the Gains, Moving the Yardstick" describes twelve priority indicators that measure the health status of Ontarians. The indicators point to disparities demonstrating that people living in poverty are at much greater risk of poorer health, disease and premature death. Dr. King points out that this reality must be acknowledged and addressed more directly in health and broader public policy. Thoughtful implementation of the recommendations of the social assistance review offers an opportunity for innovative and constructive reform that will enable social assistance recipients to contribute fully to their communities and to reduce downstream health care spending.

As detailed in our submission to the Social Assistance Review, we recommended an approach to "Do No Harm" so that changes do not reduce incomes, create income instability or remove vital supports to vulnerable populations. Improving the income security of Ontarians and their access to other essential benefits will reduce health inequities and have positive long-term impacts on the health care system.

We would be happy to offer our public health perspective and expertise in the analysis of the health impacts of any of the proposed recommendations. Please contact Siu Mee Cheng by telephone at 416-367-3313, extension 226, or by e-mail at scheng@opha.on.ca if we can assist you in any way.

Sincerely,



& *Susan Makin*

Dr. Paul Roumeliotis
President
Association of Local Public Health Agencies

Sue Makin
President
Ontario Public Health Association

cc: Dr. R. Pellizzari, Co-Chair ALPHa-OPHA Health Equity Workgroup
cc: E. Haney, Co-Chair ALPHa-OPHA Health Equity Workgroup
cc: Dr. Arlene King, Chief Medical Officer of Health
cc: Hon. Ted McMeekin, Minister of Community and Social Services
cc: Hon. Deb Matthews, Minister of Health and Long-term Care
cc: K. Heineck, Executive Director, Ontario Municipal Social Services Association
cc: P. Vanini, Executive Director, Association of Municipalities Ontario
cc: S. Cheng, Executive Director, Ontario Public Health Association
cc: L. Stewart, Executive Director, Association of Local Public Health Agencies

encl. Letter to Premier McGuinty, May 30th, 2012