

**Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) Priorities
Oral Presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs
January 26, 2023**

Good morning committee members, I am John Atkinson, the Executive Director of the Ontario Public Health Association. OPHA appreciates the opportunity to speak with you this morning regarding how the government can build a strong economy while ensuring the health and future of all Ontarians.

As public health and community health professionals dedicated to the health and well-being of Ontarians, we are making the following recommendations that provide the government with cost-effective strategies to promote health and invest in prevention, thereby reducing the cost and system burden of healthcare over time.

1. Firstly, we urge the government to restore and strengthen the public health system and workforce to ensure that Ontarians can live healthier lives in healthier local communities.

In 2019, the province introduced reductions in funding weakened our public health and community health systems that promote health at local and regional levels. With current funding, the ability for public health to meet deliverables across all standards is significantly challenged throughout the pandemic.

While the pandemic response efforts will eventually wind down, we recommend that the government sustain and increase funding to the public health and community health systems to ensure that Ontarians can count on their public health and community health systems to create supportive and healthy communities for them to live.

The backbone of strong public health and community health systems is a robust and resilient workforce. Public health staff and management were at the forefront of the pandemic response – public health inspectors, nurses, health promoters, planners, dental professionals, dietitians, librarians and many others.

We recommend that the government ensure funding for capacity building and workforce planning that supports the recruitment and retention of expertly qualified public health and community health professionals.

Further, we recommend that the government invest in engaging these health professionals and leaders in learning from the pandemic and shaping these systems moving forward to ensure they are sustainable, well equipped, accountable and transparent.

2. Secondly, we urge the government to invest in chronic disease prevention and addressing the health impacts of climate change to help Ontarians lead longer and healthier lives in healthier communities where they work and live, and in turn spending less time in healthcare settings as they age.

Prior to the pandemic, chronic diseases were the leading cause of death and disability in Ontario and took a high economic toll on the health care system – close to \$10.5 billion a year. Chronic diseases are highly preventable, and this presents strong potential for quantifiable savings.

With less than 2% of Ontario's health care budget going towards prevention there is significant opportunity for improved health outcomes for Ontarians and cost savings within the health care system through investments in prevention. We recommend that the government safeguard and increase investments in health promotion strategies and agencies which contribute to chronic disease prevention and mental health promotion, and develop a provincial chronic disease prevention strategy.

Climate change will continue to affect everyone in Ontario, but those already experiencing inequities will be disproportionately impacted. We recommend that the government revise or rescind the More Homes Built Faster Act to reverse the increased costs and negative health impacts to Ontarians. We further recommend that the government invest in climate mitigation and climate adaptation measures that can improve public health, decrease health inequities and provide multiple social, environmental and economic co-benefits.

In conclusion, an aging population, growing burden of chronic diseases and climate change are evidence of the urgent need to invest in public health and community health strategies and systems to increase Ontarians' resiliency against future health threats and reduce the demands on the health care system. These investments in community and public health will save lives, reduce healthcare costs, and help ensure that Ontarians will live healthier lives in healthier communities across our province.

Thank you on behalf of our members.