

**April 3, 2020**

**Hon. Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health**

College Park 5th Floor,  
777 Bay Street, Toronto ON, M7A 2J3

**Hon. Michael Tibollo, Associate Minister, Mental Health and Addictions**

Whitney Block 1st Floor, Rm 1618,  
99 Wellesley St W, Toronto, ON M7A 1W3

CC:

- Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health
- Helen Angus, Deputy Minister
- Heather Watt, Chief of Staff, Minister's Office (MOH)
- Harpreet Bassi, Director of Policy (MOH)
- Matthew McGregor, Director of Policy Associate Minister's Office (MHA)
- Clint Shingler, Director, Health System Emergency Management Branch
- Chris Harold, Manager, Addiction and Substances Policy and Programs, Health Protection and Surveillance Branch

Dear Hon. Deputy Premier and Minister Elliott and Hon. Minister Tibollo,

The deep impact of COVID-19 in Ontario is further complicated by another ongoing crisis - the opioid overdose and drug poisoning crisis affecting people and communities across our province. But while Health Canada has called on communities to adapt behaviours in order to contain COVID-19 and stop its community spread, people who use drugs cannot practice physical distancing without support from trusted healthcare providers.

We cannot contain the impacts of COVID-19 or the opioid crisis without adopting ambitious and forward looking strategies, like British Columbia's new [protocols](#) providing clinical guidance to providers on expanding safe supply. The protocols ensure clinicians "support patients in mitigating competing priorities and compounded risks and enable social distancing and self-isolation measures," to reduce and prevent the spread of COVID-19. B.C.'s proactive and evidence based approach has been endorsed by Canada's Chief Public Health Officer.

**We urge you to expand access to Emergency Safe Supply in Ontario, an evidence based strategy that will reduce harms linked to the opioid crisis and provide the**

**necessary infrastructure to help communities contain COVID-19 and actively participate in reducing the community spread of the pandemic.**

Our province is ready to expand access to safe supply. As early as 2019, Ontario based providers developed [Emergency Safe Supply Program protocols](#) for providers working in primary care settings. The expertise to support the implementation of these evidence based strategies already exists in Ontario. We urge you to work with leaders in this sector in developing and immediately implementing programs that work in our context.

Here's why it is important: there are barriers to the ability of people who use drugs (PWUD) meeting public health recommendations to practice physical distancing, limit public gatherings and practice self-isolation. PWUD cannot adapt these practices unsupported due to barriers including the criminalization of drugs and drug use, which forces PWUD to access drugs in an unregulated market -- necessitating more public interaction than is recommended in the current context. Additionally, Ontario's opioid and overdose crisis is driven by a tainted drug supply. Harm reduction best practice guidelines tell people using drugs from unregulated markets to avoid using alone. In the context where COVID-19 prevention measures are limiting access to supervised consumption and overdose prevention services, the risk of fatal overdoses in the community increases. PWUD need viable solutions that will allow them to practice physical distancing without risking overdose and death. Without untainted substances, the risk of overdose increases exponentially. Providers in Ottawa and Toronto have already reported increases in fatal community overdoses as COVID-19 limits access to overdose prevention facilities and services.

Our province urgently needs expanded access to clinical care models of Safe Supply. These low-barrier models reach people who are alienated from other models of health care due to structural barriers. Safe Supply programs already exist in our province and other parts of Canada, keeping people connected to care, and reducing preventable deaths. As the COVID-19 pandemic escalates, Ontario needs interventions that will reduce barriers to care. We call on you to immediately expand access to safe supply to mitigate risk to communities experiencing these dual crises.

COVID-19 and the opioid crisis both present unprecedented crises. We cannot address one at the expense of the other. We urge you to implement interventions today that will enable communities to address the impact of both.

This open letter is endorsed and signed by 111 organizations and 693 individuals.

## **Organizational Endorsements:**

- ACCHO
- ACCKWA
- ACT
- Action positive VIH/SIDA
- ACW
- AFHTO
- Africans in Partnership Against AIDS (APAA)
- AIDS ACTION NOW!
- AIDS Bereavement and Resiliency Program of Ontario
- AIDS Committee of Durham Region
- AIDS Committee of North Bay & Area
- AIDS Committee of Ottawa
- Alberta Community Council on HIV
- Alliance for Healthier Communities
- Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention
- ARCH Disability Law Centre
- Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention
- Bruce House
- Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs (CAPUD)
- Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network
- Canadian Mental Health Association, Hamilton
- Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy
- Catholic Family Development Centre (Thunder Bay)
- CATIE
- CAYR Community Connections
- Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation
- Centretown Community Health Centre
- Chigamik Community Health Center
- Chinese & Southeast Asian Legal Clinic
- Committee for Accessible AIDS Treatment
- Consumption Treatment Services (Sanguen)
- COUNTERfit Harm Reduction Program
- Downtown Legal Services
- Durham Community Legal Clinic
- Elevate NWO
- Evnt Mgmt
- Faye Peterson House
- Gay Men's Sexual Health Alliance
- Gilbert Centre
- Grand Trunk Saloon
- Grenfell Ministries
- Guelph Community Health Centre
- Hamilton Community Legal Clinic
- Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre
- Harm Reduction Saves Lives
- Hay River Health Centre
- Health Providers Against Poverty Ontario
- Hemophilia Ontario
- HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario
- HIV/AIDS Regional Services (HARS)
- HIV/AIDS Resources and Community Health (ARCH)
- Keeping Six-Hamilton Harm Reduction Action League
- Lance Krasman Memorial Centre for Community Mental Health
- LCCLC
- LetsStopAIDS
- London InterCommunity Health Centre
- MAX Ottawa
- Middlesex-London Community Drug and Alcohol Strategy
- Middlesex-London Health Unit
- Moms Stop The Harm
- Moss Park OPS
- Moyo Health and Community Services
- MSTH
- Neighbourhood Legal Services
- NorWest Community Health Centres
- NPAO (Nurse Practitioner Association of Ontario)
- Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy
- Ontario AIDS Network
- Ontario Organizational Development Program (OODP)
- OrthoGondwana Biomedica
- Osgoode Hall Law Union
- Ottawa Inner City Health
- Overdose Prevention Ottawa
- Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre
- PASAN
- Peterborough AIDS Resource Network

- Planned Parenthood Toronto
- Positive Living Niagara
- Quantum
- Regent Park Community Health Centre
- Regional HIV/AIDS Connection
- Réseau ACCESS Network
- Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services
- Sandy Hill Community Health Centre
- Sanguen Health Centre
- Sexual Abuse Centre
- Somerset West Community Health Centre
- South Riverdale Community Health Centre
- St. Stephen's Community House (The Neighbourhood Group)
- Start Me Up Niagara
- Street Health
- Sudbury Action Centre for Youth
- Sudbury Community Legal Clinic
- Sudbury Temporary Overdose Prevention Society
- SVCHC
- TBIFC
- The AIDS Network
- The Nameless
- The Seeking Help Project
- Thunder Bay Catholic School Board
- Thunder Bay Drug Strategy
- Toronto Harm Reduction Alliance (THRA)
- Toronto HIV/AIDS Network
- Toronto Overdose Prevention Society
- Toronto People with AIDS Foundation
- Toronto Urban Native Ministry
- Urban Abbey
- Venus Envy Inc.
- WellFort Community Health Services
- West Toronto Community Legal Services
- Women and HIV / AIDS Initiative (WHA)