



Pre-Budget Submission to the Minister of Finance  
The Honourable Dwight Duncan  
Queen's Park, Toronto

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## Introduction

Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) is a unified independent voice that engages governments, decision-makers, public health practitioners and all citizens committed to improving the health of Ontarians. OPHA has served as a catalyst for strengthening Public Health—preserving the environment, promoting health, reducing health disparities, preventing disease and injury—since 1949. By fostering relationships with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Ministry of Health Promotion and others, OPHA inspires governments and communities to manage Public Health challenges and initiatives with a steadfast focus on social responsibility.

This pre-budget submission from OPHA is focused on transforming key initiatives recently articulated by the government in its election campaign platform, in the Speech from the Throne, and in public statements by the Premier of Ontario into priorities that can be accommodated in the 2008-09 budget and implemented during that fiscal year.

Generally, OPHA recommends that the government:

- *Maintain the Momentum of Operation Health Protection*
- *Address the Social and Economic Determinants of Health*
- *Invest in Strategies to Improve the Environment and Health*

Funding public health to implement the newly released Injury prevention strategy, stabilizing funding for public health units, implementing a poverty reduction strategy and a strategy for addressing children's health and the environment are key aspects of the vision.

Recognizing the many competing priorities of the government, and the fiscal realities that constrain our best intentions, this submission represents a pragmatic approach to preserving and developing our greatest resource—the health of all Ontarians—while we continue to work together to make Ontario the best place to live, work and raise a family.

## Recommendations

### 1. A Healthier Ontario: Promoting Wellness and Prevention of Disease

The Government of Ontario made a firm commitment, in its election platform, to creating a healthier Ontario by focusing on the promotion of wellness in the population and the prevention of disease. The public health system is the primary instrument for assessing maintaining and improving the health of the population of Ontario. Historically, the public health system has been undervalued and consequently under-funded because, by its very nature, the efficacy of the system is difficult to demonstrate in the absence of a crisis. Because the absence of a crisis is the best evidence of a properly functioning public health system, the need to adequately maintain and strengthen the system has traditionally been ignored.

In recent years, since 2004, this government has broken with that tradition and has taken some key first steps towards strengthening the public health system. Investment in Public Health Ontario, the creation of the Agency for Health Protection and Promotion and the

uploading of public health funding to 75% provincial funding are three notable and welcome steps in the right direction. We are also anticipating the approval and release of the drafted Public Health Standards with the accompanying protocols later this year.

However there is a clear and present danger that the gains that have been made by these investments and the potential for reaping further gains could be lost unless further investments are made. These investments are required to allow the public health system reach optimal functioning capacity so that the returns on the initial investments can be realized. One investment that is critical in this regard is the implementation of the recommendations in the Capacity Review Report which was put forward in 2006. The key to an effective public health system is steady, adequate and predictable funding.

OPHA supports many of the actions identified by your government to foster wellness and the prevention of disease. The emphasis on diabetes prevention is an important starting point. We also believe that a continued focus on healthy eating and active living is essential. A stepwise investment in *Healthy Eating and Active Living* has tremendous potential for demonstrable effectiveness. OPHA suggests that the investment should increase from \$10M to \$19M in the next year and that this investment should be made in the Public Health system—the province’s most effective instrument specifically adapted and equipped for the promotion of wellness and prevention of disease.

OPHA has developed some specific suggestions as to how this additional \$9M can be invested through public health to meet the larger objectives of the government by benefiting all Ontarians. Invest \$4M to fund public health units with approximately 1 FTE per 500,000 population to support the following comprehensive approach:

- Utilize the *Eat Smart* program standards which are already being effectively utilized in 235 secondary schools as the basis for establishing recommendations under the Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act.
- Adopt Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health’s *Call to Action* as a way to address a comprehensive school nutrition environment.
- Consult broadly with school boards to build consensus around the establishment, adoption and implementation of the comprehensive nutrition policy. This has already been proposed by the Ontario Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance and Ontario Collaborative Group on Healthy Eating and Physical Activity and could be undertaken for \$300,000.
- Provide funding for OPHA’s Nutrition Resource Centre to coordinate the enhanced activity of *Eat Smart* and the implementation of a comprehensive food policy for schools.

## **2. Poverty Reduction and the Social Determinants of Health**

The OPHA applauds this government’s strong and sincere commitment to developing a poverty reduction strategy. We look forward to a fresh approach—an effective strategy that goes beyond the cynicism of simply lowering the poverty line and defining the problem out of existence, towards one that focuses on the root causes of poverty, recognizes the link

between poverty and disease, prosperity and health and makes strategic use of the connection between income and education to alleviate the burden of poverty.

The OPHA's Food Security Workgroup, recognizing the causal links between inadequate income, access to a nutrition diet, and increased risk for chronic and infectious diseases, supports the measures to improve food security (increases in social assistance and minimum wage) endorsed by Boards of Health in Toronto, Thunder Bay, Middlesex-London, Peterborough, Sudbury & District, Niagara, Durham Region; and the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, and challenges the government of Ontario to match or supersede the already successful efforts in Ireland, Quebec and Newfoundland/Labrador to implement comprehensive poverty reduction strategies.

The OPHA further recommends that the government of Ontario:

- i) Establish an independent committee including low-income people, policy experts and advocates to develop rational and just criteria for determining Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) rates;
- ii) Implement OW and ODSP rates that reflect the real cost of living and are indexed annually to reflect inflation, including the findings of yearly Nutritious Food Basket surveys conducted by local Boards of Health based on protocols established by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care; and
- iii) Set the shelter component maximum for OW clients at 85 percent of the median market rent for each local housing market, based on annual surveys conducted by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation; and
- iv) Implement immediately the full Ontario Child Benefit; and
- v) Implement immediately a \$10/hour minimum wage, and that the minimum wage be indexed to keep pace with inflation, and accompanied by a review of the Employment Standards Act to ensure vulnerable workers are protected.
- vi) Assess the feasibility of a universal dental health plan for all Ontarians

### **3. Health and the Environment**

OPHA enthusiastically supports the efforts of the government to protect health and the environment. Specifically we have advocated for three key government initiatives:

- Closing of the coal-fired power plants by 2012
- Banning the cosmetic use of pesticides
- Development of a toxic use reduction strategy.

We have recently consulted with this government about the ban on the cosmetic use of pesticides and recommend that public health units could play an important part in the education of the public about the ban provided adequate funding for this increased activity was received.

Through our work with the broad based Environmental and Occupational Carcinogen Stakeholder Group, (including the Canadian Cancer Society, labour, health sectors). OPHA

supports the government's initiative to develop a comprehensive toxic use reduction strategy. Specifically, OPHA recommends the establishment of an adequately funded institute to develop and implement a comprehensive Toxin Reduction Strategy that:

- utilizes the precautionary principle and is uniformly applicable across the province, to all industries and consumer products
- promotes the interests of vulnerable populations such as pregnant women, children and seniors.

OPHA and other partners in the Environmental and Occupational Carcinogen Stakeholder Group would be pleased to provide additional recommendations on the principles and scope of such a strategy.

### **Conclusion: Pragmatic Considerations for Economic Success 2008-09 and Beyond**

Key questions posed by the Ministry of Finance are worthy of consideration in this context:

- What of commitments in Liberal Platform should be prioritized for 2008?
- What actions should be taken to support economic growth and job creation?
- What is government doing that should be discontinued?
- Should the government continue to pressure Ottawa for Fairness for Ontario?

The government's commitments to continue strengthening the public health system should be among the highest priorities for 2008. Specifically, the recommendations of the Capacity Review Report as well as the other recommendations above are prime targets for inclusion in the 2008-09 budget. This upstream, prevention focus would preserve the potential for return on investments already made in the system and position the province, now and in the future, to benefit from its greatest resource—the health of its citizens.

### **Options for Meeting Commitments**

The demonstrated need for additional investment in Ontario's public health system immediately generates challenges regarding the source of the funding. Traditionally, the options presented for meeting this challenge are to stimulate the economic growth that is necessary to generate the funds required or for government to curtail its spending (discontinue services) in some areas in order to accommodate needs in other areas.

The OPHA fully supports the government's efforts to stimulate economic growth as one of the surest strategies to a driver for prosperity. However, the results of such efforts are not immediate and the benefits, while desirable, would not necessarily be discernable in the 2008-09 budget year. Discontinuing some services as a strategy for providing others has traditionally been a fundamentally fruitless exercise because it typically creates as many problems as it solves.

### **A Preferred Strategy for Meeting Commitments**

OPHA proposes a third option which achieves the desired objective and avoids the shortcomings of the aforementioned traditional alternatives—cut spending or expand the economy. *The funds required to contribute an additional 9M to the public health system can be raised by consolidating the current funding and programming strategies, realizing actual savings from the elimination of duplication and fostering positive collaboration*

*between organizations with similar aims and objectives.* As programs and services have been added incrementally over the years some inefficiencies (primarily duplication of effort) have crept into the system. The public health and social services sectors are already integrated into a culture of partnership and collaboration which makes the streamlining of duplications achievable within the 2008-09 budget year. OPHA would welcome the opportunity to provide further information and advice on establishing new patterns of partnership and collaboration that would eliminate duplication.

### **Transfer Payments: A Longer-Term Solution**

While OPHA fully supports all legitimate efforts to gain a fair share of transfer payments from Ottawa, we recognize that solution as being outside the locus of provincial control and therefore it would be unreasonable to depend on that scenario as a solution to the challenges to be faced in the 2008-09 budget.

### **Revitalizing Public Health: The Pathway to the Future**

Investing upstream—investment in children, healthy schools and prosperous families—produces immediate payoffs that can be measured and appreciated in the short term as well as long-term benefits of creating a population that is healthier and prepared to produce in the future. This is the key benefit of investing in public health and the most compelling reason for the government to recognize and fulfill its original election commitments. OPHA challenges the government to move beyond the conception of the public health system as a device for mitigating of the effects of poverty towards a view of the system as guardians of health and wellness in the population as, together, we fight the debilitating effects of poverty.