

# **Public Health Messages: A 2007 Provincial Election Guide**

Assembled by

**alPHa**

Association of Local  
**PUBLIC HEALTH**  
Agencies

&

**OPIHA**  
Ontario Public Health Association  
l'Association pour la santé publique de l'Ontario  
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*OPHA and alPHa have produced this guide for their members and other interested individuals and organizations to assist them in speaking out for Public Health to candidates and media during the 2007 Ontario Election campaign.*

*This guide does not make any attempt to cover the full scope of issues that affect Public Health in Ontario, but we have included a selection of information, issues and questions that we hope will spark productive discussions and raise the profile of Public Health leading up to the election. Please use them to inform candidates, write letters, and guide your choices.*

*Neither OPHA nor alPHa intend to endorse any candidate or party, and both we believe that any government, regardless of partisan politics or philosophy, will not dispute the value of strengthening Ontario's Public Health system.*

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## **PART ONE – GENERAL INFORMATION ON PUBLIC HEALTH**

### **Public Health: A Vital Service**

An “essential public service” is defined as a service, facility or activity of the Government that is or will be, at any time, necessary for the safety or security of the public or a segment of the public. Police and hospitals are two common ones. We believe that Public Health, while not officially recognized as an essential service under the law, certainly meets the definition. Like hospitals and schools, it is an indispensable part of the province’s infrastructure, providing continuous efforts and safeguards aimed at protecting and promoting health in populations and responding to health-related emergencies.

Through these efforts, people can feel confident that the food they eat, the water they drink and the air they breathe are safe, that infectious diseases will be quickly contained, and that they have the knowledge they need to prevent cancer and heart disease or to raise a healthy child.

Much of the work of Public Health is taken for granted until a health crisis arises and the simple measures that could have prevented it are itemized. The potential seriousness of such failures was clearly demonstrated during the Walkerton E. coli and Toronto SARS outbreaks in the first half of this decade.

Despite admirable responses in both cases, these tests of Ontario’s Public Health system exposed significant weaknesses and years of neglect, demonstrated its critical importance and sparked efforts to rebuild it. In June 2004, the Ontario government announced Operation Health Protection, a three-year plan to rebuild the long-neglected public health system.

Since that announcement, the government has established a Ministry of Health Promotion, strengthened the role of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, commissioned an exhaustive review of local public health capacity and mandate, and taken the first steps to establish an Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion.

But this is only the foundation. It is critical that the incoming government maintain the momentum and complete this rebuilding project even as memories of these crises fade.

## **Public Health: Your health and well being count on it every day**

The Public Health system of course plays an important role in the response to health-related emergencies, but it is constantly at work providing programs, services and messages that are aimed at keeping people healthy. Whether you know it or not, decisions you make about your health and well-being and your confidence that it is not at unacceptable risk depends on this system throughout every day:

**You decide to go out to dinner and a club with friends. Which of the following is/are related to the purpose of the Public Health system?**

- a) Your confidence that you will not be poisoned by the food or water
- b) Your choice of restaurants
- c) Your certainty that you won't be breathing second-hand smoke
- d) What you choose to eat
- e) Volunteering to be the designated driver
- f) Your decision to put a condom in your purse, just in case
- g) all of the above

**You're a parent of a school-aged child. Which of the following aspects of your child's life at school is / are related to the purpose of the Public Health system?**

- a) Almost all students are vaccinated against measles and your 13 year-old will be getting her Hepatitis shot at school next month
- b) The cafeteria provides a free breakfast of milk, fruit and cereal
- c) Your child receives three hours of physical education each week
- d) The school provides a variety of clubs, sports teams and after-school instruction
- e) You receive a report from school that a screening test indicated that your child may be slightly hearing impaired
- f) all of the above

**You are reading the morning newspaper. Which of the following headlines has / have a strong relationship to the purpose of the Public Health system?**

- a) Full-time workers earning minimum wage live in poverty
- b) Smog alert today for most of the Greater Toronto Area
- c) Provincial government to ban junk food ads aimed at kids
- d) Federal government to give tax breaks for transit passes
- e) Today's UV index: 8.7 (High)
- f) Unemployment holding steady at 6%
- g) All of the above

The answer to each of these questions is, unsurprisingly, all of the above. Ontario's Public Health system has roles and responsibilities related to every point made above. It enforces laws that ensure safe food and water, develops campaigns on safe sex, alcohol use, healthy eating and physical activity, identifies, warns of and minimizes environmental health hazards, provides or promotes a variety disease screening programs, and advocates for the social and economic determinants of health such as education, social inclusion, and freedom from violence, discrimination and poverty.

These only scratch the surface.

## Some Public Health Facts and Figures

FACT	COST-BENEFIT	REFERENCE
Public Health, through disease prevention and health promotion, reduces the economic burden of illness	Save \$2,785 per person, or \$56.7 billion per year, in direct health care costs in Ontario	Public Health Agency of Canada. (2002). <i>Economic Burden of Illness in Canada, 1998</i> . Ottawa: Health Canada. <a href="http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ebic-femc98/pdf/ebic1998.pdf">http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ebic-femc98/pdf/ebic1998.pdf</a>
Public Health prevents cancer	Save about \$2.7 billion a year in cancer care in Ontario	Cancer Care Ontario. (2004). <i>Ontario Cancer Plan 2005-2008</i> . <a href="http://www.cancercare.on.ca/pdf/OntarioCancerPlan.pdf">http://www.cancercare.on.ca/pdf/OntarioCancerPlan.pdf</a>
Tobacco use prevention, cessation, education and enforcement programs reduce tobacco-related deaths	Save \$347,000 per year on health care costs for tobacco attributable mortality in Ontario	Hamilton Regional Cancer Centre, 1989 Mortality data, Michael D.E. Goodyear, Medical Oncology, Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics.
Substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs) prevention programs reduce the burden of illness, including hospital costs, losses from the workplace, etc.	Save \$441 per person in Ontario on health care, workplace productivity, prevention and research, legal costs and productivity losses due to alcohol-related problems; in 2002, cost of alcohol-related problems was \$5 billion in Ontario	Rehm J. et al. Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse 2002 Highlights. (March 2006). <a href="http://www.ccsa.ca/NR/rdonly/res/18F3415E-2CAC-4D21-86E2-CEE549EC47A9/0/ccsa0113322006.pdf">http://www.ccsa.ca/NR/rdonly/res/18F3415E-2CAC-4D21-86E2-CEE549EC47A9/0/ccsa0113322006.pdf</a>
Public Health prevents rabies	Save \$600 to \$800 to treat each person exposed to rabies in Ontario	Missing rabies shot could cost pet owners \$5,000. <i>The Globe and Mail</i> . (Sept. 27, 1993).
Public Health prevention programs keeps seniors out of hospitals	Save up to \$10,000 per senior hospitalized due to a fall	Are you in Jeopardy? <i>Community Presentation Manual</i> . Central West Seniors Safety Committee. p. 7
Public Health inspections prevent people from getting sick due to food borne illnesses	Save \$306 per person made ill by food poisoning in Ontario and \$459,000,000 per year* * based on 1991 dollars	<i>Costs Associated with Food borne Illness: A Brief Cost Analysis</i> . Sudbury & District Health Unit. (1996).

## **PART TWO – INFORMATION ON CURRENT PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES AND QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES**

### **WE ARE CALLING ON CANDIDATES TO MAKE THE REVITALIZATION OF ONTARIO’S PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM A PRIORITY CAMPAIGN ISSUE.**

Ontario’s Public Health system was closely scrutinized following a series of crises, chief among them the Walkerton *E. coli* outbreak in 2000 and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003. Detailed accounts of neglect and erosion are available in the [Report of the Walkerton Inquiry](#), the reports of the [Ontario Expert Panel on SARS and Infectious Diseases \(Walker\)](#), the [National Advisory Committee on SARS and Public Health \(Naylor\)](#), and the [SARS Commission Interim Report \(Campbell\)](#). Others that have revealed gaps in Public Health infrastructure include the Meat Regulatory and Inspection Review (Haines) report, the Report of the Expert Panel on Legionnaire’s Disease and the 2005 Annual Report of the Chief medical Officer of Health. Each makes equally detailed recommendations to government on how to fix it.

#### **1. MAINTAIN THE MOMENTUM OF OPERATION HEALTH PROTECTION**

##### ***Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion***

The passage of the Health System Improvements Act has enabled the establishment of an internationally recognized centre of expertise dedicated to the protection and promotion of the health of all Ontarians through the application and advancement of science and knowledge.

Its responsibilities are to include surveillance and epidemiology, research, knowledge exchange, specialized Public Health laboratory services, professional development, and communication. It will focus on infectious diseases, health promotion, chronic disease and injury prevention, and environmental health. The agency will also provide support in emergency circumstances.

- **As a member of provincial parliament, how do you intend to support the swift implementation of the Agency?**

##### ***Revitalizing Ontario’s Public Health Capacity***

In her 2005 annual report, Ontario’s Chief medical Officer of Health observed, “Ontario’s 36 local public health units are the front line of the province’s health protection system. There are a number of important

questions regarding how they are structured and whether they have sufficient capacity to protect and promote the health of all Ontarians.” Since then, the Ontario Government has received a detailed report from the Capacity Review Committee, which contains 50 recommendations on revitalizing the Public Health workforce, strong governance, and stable and adequate funding.

In the report of the Walkerton Inquiry, Justice O’Connor’s first recommendation was to expeditiously fill all Medical Officer of Health vacancies in the province. Five years later, the vacancy rate has not changed.

- **As a member of provincial parliament, how do you intend to ensure that long-standing Medical Officer of Health vacancies are filled?**
- **What strategies would you put in place to eliminate other Public Health workforce shortages?**

Ontario’s Public Health units have always faced a range of cost pressures [limited municipal property tax base, a provincial cap on Public Health spending, population densities and varying health needs). Their inability to deliver the minimum provincially mandated programming and service standards is both chronic and universal. The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care spends just over 1% of its entire budget on Public Health.

- **As a member of provincial parliament, how do you intend to ensure that all Public Health units have the stable and predictable funding required to deliver the same level of excellence in Public Health programs and services throughout Ontario?**

### ***Ontario Public Health Standards***

As part of Operation Health Protection, the Ontario Government has commissioned and received a revision of the programs and services that all health units are mandated to carry out. These include strategies to reduce chronic diseases and injuries, improve life stage-related health outcomes, prevent and control infectious diseases, reduce or eliminate environmental health hazards, and prepare for emergencies. Each is aimed at preventing injury and disease.

- **As a member of provincial parliament, do you intend to support policies that emphasize prevention of illness over treatment of disease and allocate resources accordingly?**

- **As a member of provincial parliament, do you intend to support and expand on the strategies and funding to \$19 million for the Healthy Eating, Active Living initiative to prevent the chronic diseases associated with poor nutrition and inactivity and do you intend to add new funding to support the newly released Injury Prevention Strategy?**
- **As a member of provincial parliament, do you intend to implement strategies to ensure that all health units have the capacity to fully meet these standards, as mandated by the Province?**

## **2. ADDRESS SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH**

Ontario's Public Health system is very involved in issues that are inextricably linked to their core functions of health promotion and protection, disease prevention, and surveillance. Determinants of health include income, employment status, education, social and physical environments, healthy child development, access to health services and more.

- **Poverty is widely considered to be the number one risk factor in poor health. Do you support the development of an income security strategy including immediate increases to social assistance rates and minimum wages to ensure that all Ontarians have access to shelter as well as adequate and nutritious food?**
- **As a member of provincial parliament, do you intend to expand the strategies and increase the funding to \$19 million for the Healthy Eating, Active Living initiative to prevent chronic diseases associated with poor nutrition inactivity?**
- **Do you intend to add new funding to support the newly released injury prevention strategy?**

## **3. INVEST IN STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH**

Environment and health are consistently the top two concerns in public opinion polls, and they are inseparable.

- **As a member of provincial parliament, would you support a requirement for Public Health Impact Statements, similar to**

**Environmental Impact Statements, as part of government policy?**

- **As a member of provincial parliament, what strategies will you support or implement to improve Ontario's air quality?**
- **Will your government commit to a strategy to comprehensively address children's health and the environment including issues of prevention, treatment, education and social support, pollution prevention and remediation of housing?**
- **Will your government develop and implement a toxic substance reduction strategy supported by necessary financial, regulatory and program resources, to be implemented before the end of the next mandate?**

## PART THREE - RESOURCES

### How to find:

#### Your current MPP

Ontario Legislative Assembly: [www.ontla.on.ca](http://www.ontla.on.ca)

#### Who's running in your riding?

Elections Ontario: [www.electionsontario.on.ca](http://www.electionsontario.on.ca)

#### The platforms of each of the political parties

Liberal: [www.ontarioliberal.ca](http://www.ontarioliberal.ca)

NDP: [www.ontariondp.com](http://www.ontariondp.com)

Progressive Conservative: [www.ontariopc.on.ca](http://www.ontariopc.on.ca)

#### The parties' records on Public Health, poverty and the environment:

The Ontario Legislative Assembly website – [www.ontla.on.ca](http://www.ontla.on.ca) – has all the records of debates and votes. You can find the current session's debates in the Hansard A-Z index and detailed accounting of all the bills that have come before the Legislature, both currently and in the past.

#### How to meet the candidates

- They'll show up at your door...be prepared with questions.
- If you're not home, they'll leave materials behind. Feel free to phone or email them with your questions.
- Attend all-candidates meetings in your ridings – this is a great opportunity to outline Public Health issues for all parties as well as for other voters in your riding.

#### How to get issues into the media

- Media are often present at all-candidates meetings and debates
- If you work at a Public Health unit or are a board of health trustee, you may receive calls from the media. Remember to be receptive and open, and if you feel that you need time to respond, offer to call back with the information that is being requested.
- Editorials and letters to local newspapers are widely read during election campaigns, both by the public and by candidates – some tips on submitting these are offered below.

## **Tips for writing letters to the editor**

- Most newspapers will have information on the requirements for submissions to their editorial pages - make sure you read this before making your submission
- Letters need not be lengthy. Letters are usually not more than 300 words in length, and they are often edited by the newspaper, so make sure you can make your point clearly within that limit.
- Op-ed pieces may be longer, but there are different criteria for accepting these. They will more likely be accepted if you are in a position of expertise (e.g. a chair of a local board or a medical officer of health)
- Choose an issue that has had recent coverage in the media – use a recent story as a starting point for your arguments
- Begin the letter by referring to the issue or the title and date of publication of the item you are going to discuss.
- Deal with only one topic and focus on one major message. Aim for a straightforward, factual approach.
- Avoid indulging in emotional or broad sweeping statements that a few weeks later may look embarrassing.
- It is important to get your letter off quickly while the issue is still topical. This will increase your chances of publication. Try to fax or email your letter - it is faster.
- If not printed the first time, don't hesitate to try again!

## **Sample Letter to the Editor**

*Date*

*Name*

*Address*

*Letters to the Editor*

*[Identify yourself & affiliation, if any.]*

*Re. Health Care expected to account for 50% of all government spending by 2010 (August 8, 2007)*

*Most of us recognize and support the need for high quality, accessible publicly-funded treatment services, but it has become clear that current government spending on these services is unsustainable.*

*If we are to preserve this system, we must recognize that most of the progress made in reducing illness and death has come from preventive services and healthy public policies, such as water treatment, affordable housing, immunization, income support and injury prevention programs. In more familiar terms, an ounce of prevention is indeed worth a pound of cure. And yet, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care spends just over 1% of its entire budget on the local health units that keep our food and water safe, give us information on how to protect ourselves from chronic diseases and vaccinate many of us against the flu each year.*

*The continuous availability of high quality and publicly-funded doctors, hospitals, technology and medicine depends on reducing the need for them. We must therefore prioritize “health care” over “sick care” by investing much more in the essential services that are aimed at keeping people well.*

*Sincerely,*

*Name*

*Phone number*

## ***About alPHa and OPHA***

*The Association of Local Public Health Agencies and the Ontario Public Health Association are the organizations that represent the boards of health, management and staff of Ontario's Public Health system. We collaborate with governments and other health organizations in advocating for a strong, effective and efficient public health system in the province. We play a vital role in improving the health of all Ontarians.*

### *Mission Statements*

- *alPHa, through a strong and unified voice, advocates for Public Health policies, programs and services on behalf of member health units in Ontario.*
- *The mission of the Ontario Public Health Association is to provide leadership on issues affecting the public's health and to strengthen the impact of people who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario.*

*Carrying out these missions includes: provision of educational opportunities; sharing information between members and policymakers; provision of opportunities to collectively discuss approaches to current and emerging Public Health issues; coordinated advocacy efforts; expert policy analysis; and strong links with other health organizations.*

*Please visit our web sites for more information:*

*alPHa: [www.alphaweb.org](http://www.alphaweb.org)*

*OPHA: [www.opha.on.ca](http://www.opha.on.ca)*