

The Honourable Christine Elliott
Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
777 Bay Street, 5th Floor
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 2J3

Email: Christine.Elliott@ontario.ca

[Insert date]

Dear Minister Elliott,

The [insert board name] is deeply concerned about the absence of paid sick leave standards for workers in the province. As a matter of public health, we urge your government to update employment standards to implement paid sick days for all workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the urgency of paid sick days for curbing the transmission of infectious disease and protecting public health. As of December 4, 2020, 30 percent of active outbreaks in Ontario were workplace outbreaks. [Option to insert local workplace outbreak data.] Workplaces with precarious jobs where workers lack access to paid sick leave have become hotspots for COVID-19 infection transmission, including outbreaks in long-term care homes, farms, meat-processing plants, grocery stores, and warehouses.

The most recent Statistics Canada General Social Survey shows that 58% of workers in Canada have no access to paid sick days. For workers earning less than \$25,000, over 70% have no paid sick days. In the trade and transportation sector, which include grocery store and warehouse workers, 62% of workers lack paid sick days. In the service sector, including food services, the percentage is higher at 75%. Even in the health care and social services sectors, where risk of exposure to infectious disease is highest, 50% of workers do not have paid sick days.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the urgency of addressing gaps in paid sick days as a matter of health equity. Low-wage workers, who are disproportionately Black and racialized, are more likely to be denied paid sick days and have faced higher rates of COVID-19, including in [insert region]. These gaps are especially dangerous for workers with chronic health or immunocompromised conditions, and for persons with disabilities, seniors, children, and patients who rely on workers to provide care and support.

Staying home when sick is one of the most effective containment strategies for infectious disease. A 2006 Public Health Agency of Canada report studying gastrointestinal illness shows that workers in high-risk settings — food handling, long-term care and child care — will continue to work when ill when they cannot afford to take time off. A 2018 study from Swiss Economic Institute's Stefan Pichler and Cornell University's Nicolas Ziebarthin found that cities in the United States with paid sick days saw a 40% reduction in influenza rates during flu waves compared to cities without.

Workers without paid sick days are forced to choose between sacrificing their financial security for public health or going to work sick to support themselves and their families. Without public policy to support people to make the decision to stay home when they are ill, behavioural recommendations are limited in their effectiveness.

Chief Public Health Officer of Canada Theresa Tam recognizes why paid sick leave is essential to protect worker and community health in her October 2020 report *From Risk to Resilience: An Equity Approach to COVID-19*:

“Without paid sick leave, employees may lose income if they become ill and are unable to work. Without employment security, they may lose their jobs if they stay home when sick. In either case, or particularly if they are economically insecure, workers may feel unable to comply with public health guidance to stay home when sick.”

In addition, paid sick days support effective immunization uptake. Evidence shows paid sick days increase vaccination rates. Both workers with paid sick days and their children have higher vaccination rates against the flu, and better access to other preventive health services.

We urge your government to consider the following recommendations to contain the spread of infectious disease and protect public health:

- Update employment standards to require employers to provide at least 7 days of paid emergency leave on a permanent basis.
- Update employment standards to require employers to provide an additional 14 days of paid emergency leave during public health emergencies.

Not only are these measures crucial for protecting against COVID-19, but they will also protect public health from infectious pathogens like influenza and future outbreaks, as we have seen with SARS and H1N1.

Thank you for reviewing this information and we look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Insert signature
Insert title]

cc: Hon. Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario (premier@ontario.ca)

Hon. Monte McNaughton, Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development
(monte.mcnaughton@pc.ola.org)

Dr. David Williams, Provincial Chief Medical Officer of Health
(dr.david.williams@ontario.ca)

[Option to include local MPP]