



## Main Office - Belleville

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February 5, 2021

The Honourable Christine Elliott  
Deputy Premier and Minister of Health  
Ministry of Health  
777 Bay Street, 5th Floor  
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Sent via email: [Christine.Elliott@ontario.ca](mailto:Christine.Elliott@ontario.ca)

Dear Minister Elliott:

The Hastings Prince Edward Board of Health is concerned about the current absence of paid sick leave standards for workers in the province. As a matter of public health, with an aim to reduce overall costs and strain for the health care system, we request government to consider updating employment standards to implement paid sick days for all workers. We support the principles outlined in Bill 239 with regard to paid sick days.

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the need for paid sick days in order to curb the transmission of infectious disease. This would result in overall protection of public health. As of December 4, 2020, 30 percent of active outbreaks of COVID-19 in Ontario occurred in workplaces. As of September 1, 2020, workplaces have been associated with seven out of eight outbreaks in Hastings and Prince Edward Counties (HPEC). One in five cases of COVID-19 in HPEC have been acquired at a workplace outbreak or have been a close contact of someone who contracted COVID-19 from a workplace outbreak. Workplaces with precarious jobs where workers lack access to paid sick leave have become hotspots for COVID-19 transmission. These include but are not limited to outbreaks in long-term care homes, farms, meat-processing plants, grocery stores, and warehouses.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the urgent need to address gaps in access to 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 face higher rates of COVID-19. These gaps are especially dangerous for workers with chronic health or immunocompromised conditions, persons with disabilities, seniors, children, and patients who rely on support 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 such as 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 Ziebarth 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 in order to prevent the spread of illness or going to work while sick in order to support themselves and

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their families. Without proactive and supportive public policy in place to help make it feasible for workers 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, and particularly if they are economically insecure, workers may feel unable to comply with public health guidance to stay home when sick.”

In addition to the points mentioned above, 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.

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 considering our recommendations, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Jo-Anne Albert  
Board Chair  
Hastings Prince Edward Board of Health



Piotr Oglaza MD, CPHI(C), CCFP, MPH, FRCPC  
Medical Officer of Health and CEO  
Hastings Prince Edward Public Health

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