

January 29, 2009

The Honourable Dwight Duncan  
Minister of Finance and  
Chair of Management Board of Cabinet  
7 Queen's Park Crescent, 7<sup>th</sup> floor  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1Y7

The Honourable Deb Matthews  
Minister of Children and Youth Services and  
Chair, Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction  
M-1B114, Macdonald Block  
900 Bay Street  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1N3

Dear Ministers Duncan and Matthews:

We are a joint working group sponsored by the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) and the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa). Our membership is drawn from both organizations, demonstrating a solid commitment to helping Ontario's Public Health system take action on improving the social conditions that determine health.

Our purpose is to provide leadership and common messaging related to promoting the social determinants of health and ensuring that the Ontario's Public Health system is mobilized in this effort. Today, we take the opportunity to congratulate you on announcing and implementing Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy and to provide a few pre-budget comments that emphasize the importance of making specific investments in key policy areas in order to achieve the stated poverty reduction targets.

The Ontario Public Health Standards are built upon the understanding that a set of underlying conditions determine the health of Ontarians. Income and social status are noted as key determinants of health. Often, population health outcomes are disproportionately influenced by priority populations who experience poor health as a result of economic and/or social conditions. Poverty is a key social determinant of health and the current government's commitment to poverty reduction is encouraging. We commend your government for announcing the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy on December 4, 2008 and for your stated intention to improve the lives and prospects of poor people in Ontario. The Public Health system in Ontario is also committed to working toward these goals.

Clearly, the recent economic downturn combined with the significant problem of poverty presents a special challenge to the current provincial budget process. We are pleased that Ontario's Poverty

Reduction Strategy recognizes the cost of poverty to Ontarians and is designed to reduce poverty as part of the government's duty to maintain and strengthen the long term economic vitality of the province.

Despite the imminent possibility of an economic recession, the majority of Ontarians (according to a poll commissioned by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives) say that it is more important than ever for governments to make helping poor Ontarians a priority. Eighty percent of Ontarians say it is time to take strong political leadership towards reducing the number of poor people in Canada.

We stress the importance of 2 budgetary strategies during these times:

### **Strong Labour Market Focus**

Low wages and poor working conditions mean that the traditional notions of poverty -- the results of low social assistance rates -- is often replaced by "labour market poverty", which means living in poverty despite holding a full-time job. Almost half of low income children in Ontario live in families with a parent who is in the workforce full time, but are still unable to earn sufficient income to lift their families out of poverty. We urge you to address this in the upcoming provincial budget by:

- **Increasing the minimum wage to \$10.25/hr in 2008 dollars (equivalent to \$10/hr in 07 dollars).** Do not wait until 2010 as planned. Further, we would recommend that you consider preserving the effectiveness of setting a minimum wage by indexing it to inflation to stop its erosion over time.
- **Extending the same protections offered to full-time workers under the Employment Standards Act to contract, temporary and self-employed workers.** We are pleased to learn that as part of the poverty reduction strategy you will invest in new employment standards officers to improve compliance with the Act. We are also pleased to learn of your intention to propose legislation related to temporary help agencies. We urge a more comprehensive legislative approach however. It is estimated that 37% of all jobs now are precarious -- part time, contract, temporary or self-employed. We are concerned that many vulnerable workers will still fall through the cracks unless the Employment Standards Act is updated to ensure that contract, temporary and self-employed workers have the same protections as full time workers.

### **Strengthen the Social Safety Net**

We recommend two immediate steps to strengthen Ontario's social safety net:

- Index social assistance rates to inflation as Quebec and Newfoundland & Labrador have done. As with minimum wage changes, this is the best way to extend and ensure lasting protection to Ontario's most vulnerable groups.

- Expedite the implementation of the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) so that families receive the full benefit sooner. While we support the increase to OCB announced in the provincial strategy, 2012 is simply too long to wait. The deleterious effects of poverty on very young children need to be avoided immediately in order to maximize the long term investment in alleviating child poverty.

By adopting the Low Income Measure, Ontario has improved its mechanism for measuring and tracking progress on reducing poverty. However, the Low Income Measure (LIM) does not tell the full story of people who live in poverty. The establishment of other targets in areas of health, education, housing and deprivation will help to strengthen the effort to evaluate successes.

The move to establish a Social Policy Institute that will focus on evidence-based social policy development and the evaluation of social policy interventions is of particular significance and will be particularly effective operating at arms length from government. We very much look forward to the Institute's contribution to the formulation of policy addressing the social determinants of child health, dental health, food security and policy that will contribute to a reduction in health inequities for which both OPHA and alPHa have consistently advocated. The province has recently invested in the creation of the Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion to provide scientific and technical support and advice to government (among other stakeholders) and respond to opportunities and priorities in promoting health and wellness. Ontario's new Public Health standards emphasize surveillance of priority populations. We see social conditions -- poverty in particular -- as key factors that determine the health of Ontarians. We recommend that the Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion and the new Social Policy Institute work together to strengthen their efforts and to avoid duplication.

We are supportive of the recommendations in Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy due to public health's interest in the determinants of health that have a positive impact on persons living in poverty in Ontario – there is a clear health benefit. We wish to emphasize, however, that there is one program included in the Strategy that is of direct interest to the public health sector. This program is Healthy Babies Healthy Children (HBHC), funded through the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS). The 36 public health units in Ontario have been receiving funding since the late 1990s to ensure the provision of the services included in this essential program. As the Strategy states, *The Healthy Babies Healthy Children program is committed to giving kids the best possible start in life* (p.8). Public health is entirely committed to the delivery of this program, so much so that many health units have been supplementing MCYS funding with other program funding or municipal funding. Insufficient funding for the HBHC Program has been an issue since the inception of the program. The HBHC Program provides services that Ontario families require, particularly low income families, that assist them to overcome the impact of poverty, provide children with a healthy start in life, and enhance opportunities for life-long success, contributing to a strong Ontario economy. Many health units have had to make the very difficult decision to reduce HBHC services in the past few years due to a serious funding deficit. A significant increase to base funding for the HBHC Program along with annual increases to maintain service delivery to complement the poverty reduction strategy is urgently needed.

The Honourable Dwight Duncan  
The Honourable Deb Matthews

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As always, we will be pleased to offer our support and assistance as Ontario moves forward on poverty reduction. From a Public Health perspective it is a crucial measure towards improving the health of Ontarians.

Sincerely yours,



Carol Timmings  
President, OPHA



Charles Gardner  
President, alPHa

cc: The Honourable Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario  
The Honourable David Caplan, Minister of Health and Long Term Care  
The Honourable Margaret Best, Minister of Health Promotion  
Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health (A),  
Ms. Allison Stuart, Assistant Deputy Minister (A), Ministry of Health and Long Term Care  
Cynthia Morton, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health Promotion  
Jean Lam, Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health Promotion  
Mary Beth Valentine, Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health Promotion