



THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC HEALTH IN ONTARIO

alPHa Board of Directors
Position Paper

November 2003

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA) is an independent, non-profit association representing public health units in Ontario and their boards of health. Members include the 37 provincial public health units, medical officers of health and Affiliate organizations representing public health managers in the areas of business administration, dentistry, epidemiology, health promotion, inspection, nursing, and nutrition.

alPHA's mission is to advocate for public health policies, programs and services on behalf of member health units in Ontario through a strong and unified voice. It provides leadership in the management and delivery of efficient, effective and sustainable public health programs and services. By meeting with government and other health-related organizations, and facilitating the exchange of information, alPHA seeks to continuously strengthen the programs and services aimed at improving the health of the province's population.

This paper presents the consensus view of the alPHA Board of Directors and outlines its vision of the future of Ontario's public health system. The first part outlines the founding principles of the public health system and the essential services that should be expected of all local health units. The second describes the current system in Ontario and the challenges it faces, and suggests strategies for the future to ensure that this system is strengthened to uphold its founding principles, and to allow the continuing and effective provision of essential public health services.

A Sustainable Healthcare System

There is a growing consensus that Ontario's healthcare system is not sustainable and more money will not make it so. Creating a system where scarce resources are consumed in areas that result in the greatest impact will be critical in ensuring universal healthcare for all Ontarians in the future. In other words, getting the most value will be key to creating a long-term, sustainable healthcare system.

The issues of public health are those that are most important to all people within Ontario. As we enter into the 21st century, the water we drink, the food we eat and the air we breathe are under attack. As well, rising rates of cancer, heart disease and other chronic diseases plague our communities. It has been said, that healthcare matters to everyone some of the time, but public health matters to everyone all of the time. The issues of public health are managed using extremely low cost initiatives compared to those of acute care.

Economic Impact of Good Public Health

The relationship between health and the economy was highlighted by the Toronto area-based Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, which showed that the business sector and economic health of the province can be heavily impacted by public health crises, both foreseen and unforeseen. Public health's ability to effectively control emerging risks while continuing to provide its baseline duties will carry the weight of economic pressures as never before.

Public Health Principles

The principles that have guided public health practice in Ontario in the past remain a strong foundation for the programs and services that are designed to protect and promote health and wellness. They will continue to guide the system in the future:

Wellness

Public health seeks to prevent illness, not treat it. Maintaining health and wellness in the population for the long term is the goal of any of public health's strategies in disease prevention, health protection and health promotion. Their success depends on the capacity of the system to carry them out.

Determinants of health

Community and individual health is determined to a large extent by broader societal factors, including education, employment, income, housing, nutrition, the environment, and social justice. The effectiveness of health protection and disease prevention strategies thus depends on how favourable the conditions for health are in a given situation. The social determinants of health will often inform what interventions are needed most and how public health providers will advocate for or deliver them. Creating conditions for optimum health begins with strengthening these broader societal factors, which then facilitate successful interventions aimed at positively influencing lifestyle behaviours and increasing knowledge of activities that contribute to positive health outcomes.

Universality

Public health favours universal and equitable access to its programs for all Ontarians across cultures, income levels and education levels. Social, educational and environmental barriers to accessing these programs must be identified, and program and service delivery must be tailored to overcome them wherever practical and appropriate.

Local input

Public health provides for public input and accountability at the local level. Program planning and development is guided by community needs assessment and collection of health status data that inform the nature of advocacy, health protection and health promotion activities.

Multidisciplinary approaches

The use of a multidisciplinary team of public health practitioners, including dentists, epidemiologists, health promoters, inspectors, nurses, nutritionists and dieticians, physicians and administrators, helps to establish partnerships with other sectors in the community to better deliver public health programs and services.

Partnership

Building alliances at the provincial and local level is a fundamental public health practice. Public health collaborates with other organizations and sectors in the province and local community to identify and address health needs as well as to plan and develop programs.

Best practices

In an effort to maximize the effectiveness of its programs and services, the public health system must continually evaluate them, examine alternatives, and assess new technologies in order to ensure that best practices are being employed.

Science-based

Public health programs and approaches are based on the science and evidence of research into many disciplines affecting population health. Research findings are critical to the understanding of public health issues and to the design of effective practices to address them.

Sustainability

A strong public health system must always be able to deliver effective programs and services to maximize positive health outcomes for the communities and citizens that it serves. A sustainable public health system never falls below a minimum standard of service, responds to changing needs, and is resilient enough to react to extraordinary challenges.

Essential Public Health Services

Public health has long been at the forefront of providing the best opportunity for improved health of the population. Over the centuries, broad-based strategies to prevent disease and protect health have resulted in achievements such as cleaner water, better sanitation and immunizations – all of which have dramatically improved health and increased longevity in the population. Today, programs aimed at preventing illness, disease, and injury (e.g. cancer screening and public education), protecting communities from health hazards (e.g. disease surveillance and control) and promoting healthy lifestyles (e.g. smoking cessation, food label education) are the foundation to keeping Ontarians in good health. By adopting broad-spectrum approaches aimed at the root causes of poor health, public health initiatives contribute to the well-being of citizens and are a key component of the provincial health system. They reduce the burden of illness in society and often, save the health care system money in the long-term.

In Ontario, the health unit is the agency responsible for delivering public health programs and services to its local communities. It does so following the philosophy that all Ontarians should enjoy the same minimum standards for community health, tailored for local circumstances. It undertakes the following core public health activities in each community:

Monitor health status to identify community health problems

Health units accurately and periodically assess the community's health status, by identifying health risks and determining health services needs; paying attention to the vital statistics and health status of high-risk groups; and identifying community resources that support the local health unit in promoting health and improving quality of life. They interpret and communicate data to diverse audiences, including community members, their counterparts in other jurisdictions and governments. Public health units also collaborate with other health providers such as local hospitals to establish and use population health information systems, such as disease or immunization registries.

Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community

A local health unit performs epidemiological investigations of disease outbreaks and patterns of infectious and chronic diseases and injuries. It also monitors for local environmental hazards, and other health threats. It designs and implements active infectious disease epidemiology programs, conducts inspections of sites and businesses where health hazards are most likely to appear, and works with public health laboratories in order to confirm assumptions made during the execution of these programs.

Inform, educate and empower people about health issues

The health unit plays a key role in informing and educating its communities about reducing health risks and achieving better health. It promotes activities that are designed toward these two goals. Through communication plans and strategies such as media advocacy and social marketing, the health unit delivers its messages to intended audiences. Well-researched information and educational resources on health issues are made available to the public. The local health agency partners with a variety of community stakeholders, including schools, workplaces and primary care providers, on health education and health promotion programs to implement and reinforce public health messages.

Mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems

Health problems come in many forms, and can affect many diverse constituents within a community. For this reason, public health units identify potential partners with additional expertise on a given sector of the community. These partners can both contribute to and benefit from public health services, as they increase the awareness of the value of these services. By building coalitions, health units draw upon the full range of potential human and material resources to improve the overall health of a community. They convene and facilitate partnerships among groups and associations, including those not typically considered to be health-related, to work on health improvement initiatives such as preventive, screening and support programs. An example of this is working with local police on drug education geared toward youth.

Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts

Health units are, for all intents and purposes, a government presence at the municipal level. They are responsible for implementing the laws governing public health, and are in most cases the agencies that must answer residents' concerns about them. The development of local policies and procedures that facilitate the implementation and communication of provincial or municipal legislation is a key role of the local health unit. This involves the alignment of local resources and strategies with the community health improvement plan. Not only is systematic community-level planning for health improvement undertaken, but provincial-level planning must also be done. Health units thus form an essential link between the community they serve and the policymakers that guide that service.

Enforce laws and regulations that safeguard health and ensure safety

Health units provide the enforcement function for many of Ontario's health protection laws. To this end, they must be knowledgeable about the reasons for the laws and must be able to identify best practices for achieving compliance. To encourage compliance within the community, health units educate individuals and organizations about health hazards and their control, while reminding them of their own obligations

in that regard. Areas of public health concern in which enforcement activities are undertaken include, but are not limited to: drinking water, food safety, the sale and use of tobacco, and childhood immunizations, to name just a few.

Assure a competent public health workforce

The local health unit assesses its own workforce, and may provide important information to volunteers and other community health workers, to meet community needs for public health services. It adopts ongoing quality improvement and life-long learning programs for staff members, including provision of opportunities for formal and informal public health leadership development.

Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility and quality of population-based health programs

Health units are required to ensure that local programs address the needs of the community, paying attention to effectiveness, efficiency and available evidence. In order to do this, they must gather all relevant data on community health status by communicating with other organizations. In order to gauge the effectiveness of public health programs and services, health units must analyze and report on this data, using it to plan innovative and effective, evidence-based programs. They also assess the accessibility and quality of services delivered. The information gained in this analysis is used to allocate resources and reshape programs accordingly.

Research new insights and innovative solutions to health problems

To remain in the vanguard of population health protection, local health systems must maintain a continuum of innovative solutions to health problems ranging from practical field-based efforts to foster change in public health practice, to more academic efforts to encourage new directions in scientific research. Health units must also link with institutions of higher learning and research. They must have the capacity to mount timely epidemiological and health policy analyses and conduct health systems research.

The Current Situation

The above theory of the public health system, as codified in the Health Protection and Promotion Act and the Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines, sets out the framework within which Ontario's public health units assume the leading role in improving community health. Their particular expertise in delivering population-health based initiatives designed to maximize positive health outcomes simultaneously informs and is supported by local decision-making of their local governing bodies, the boards of health. These boards comprise elected officials, citizens and provincial appointees who bring

local concerns on community health issues forward for discussion and resolution. Boards of health in turn provide valuable input on municipal bylaws and policies. Such involvement provides for direct accountability to the community.

This arrangement allows health units to maintain a strong community presence as a visible service provider, while participating in the local governance process that guides the development and delivery of those services, which account for the basic as well as unique needs of their communities. What is worth noting here is that the structure within which these processes take place is largely founded on decisions and policy made at the provincial level. This is not limited to health policy, as municipalities are required to provide a wide variety of services to their residents, with which public health must often compete for limited local resources.

There are few political decisions that do not have some impact on health. Despite this, and the high value placed on health in the community, public health at the provincial level remains very much a fragmented system in need of greater overall coordination. Even Ontario's broader health system is one of many solitudes in which the various sectors, ranging from prevention (health units) to treatment (hospitals and primary care practitioners) to long-term care, operate independently of one another for the most part. Where collaboration exists, it is generally informal. Within the Ontario public health sector itself, inefficiencies, gaps in service and discrepancies between standards of practice result from scarce resources and lack of central co-ordination and leadership.

Challenges

Ontario's public health system presently faces several challenges that threaten its effectiveness in the future.

Shortage of Professionals

The health care sector in general is currently experiencing a shortage of skilled personnel. Public health, too, has been affected. As Ontario health units continue to experience low staff recruitment and retention rates, finding the hands to carry out the activities that keep populations healthy will remain a significant challenge in the coming months. In the longer term, human resource issues within the public health system may prove to be the critical factor in whether programs and services will get delivered where they are most needed.

Eroded Funding

Although there is growing recognition of and movement toward preventive approaches to health, treatment of disease remains the focus of the vast majority of provincial health spending. Provincial funding for public health is less than 1% of the overall health care budget. This, despite the fact that limited future health gains will be made through the treatment sector, where costs for high technologies will continue to soar in the future. Public health programming, on the other hand, will keep people healthy for a relatively much lower cost. Healthy populations need treatment less often and respond better to treatment when it is required. Investments in public health mean that the returns of improved health are not realized immediately but in the long term. However, without committed funding, the weakening of a system that is supposed to protect health is a constant, real threat.

Inconsistent Community Health Data

At the present, public health information systems and the resulting data yield inconsistent information in the face of increasing demands by funders for greater access to public health statistics and data. These systems are outdated and in need of redesign. Without this, program evaluation and planning will be inefficient, a significant obstacle to achieving the best possible outcomes for services provided.

Societal Changes

Demographic shifts such as an aging population, increasing ethno-cultural diversity, the accelerated pace of change due to technology as well as growing public interest and knowledge of health will impact public health practices in the years to come. Public health will need to be equipped to accommodate these trends, adapting and responding to them as necessary.

The Future

In the face of such challenges, the public health system in Ontario will need to become more effective and stronger over the next decade. To ensure that it does, the following components need to be in place:

Centralization

Any public health system should include a provincial body that sets public health priorities, policies, regulation and standards. Comprehensive public health goals should be developed by and shared among the various provincial ministries involved with or affected by public health. Mandatory programs must be sustainable, especially during critical times when public health resources are stretched to their limits. The Chief Medical Officer of Health should be an independent position through which advocacy efforts may be directed. This role could be one of champion or watchdog of public health. In a centralized system, greater coordination of public health campaigns and their developments is essential to avoid duplication at

the local levels. A strong, centralized public health system would allow for comprehensive, consistent communications with all stakeholders. Information must be reliable, evidence-based, building on past and current successes while communicating performance and results. Above all, it must be motivated by the inherent value of good health and not by politics.

Government Support

Greater support from the provincial government for health unit professionals and board of health members is essential. Support includes:

- sufficient funding for the sector and development of new funding models focused on the determinants of health;
- more research and complete and consistent technical advice for health unit professionals on issues of the day;
- open, two-way communication between the provincial and local health authorities for the development and implementation of sound public health policy;
- greater education and training for board of health members; and
- resolution of the ongoing problem of the shortage of public health professionals and staff positions in this province.

Legislation and public policy must be used to reinforce provincially articulated public health goals.

Local Input and Autonomy

The system should allow for local autonomy and decision-making on the delivery of provincially mandated programs and services. Autonomy at the local board of health level ensures effective implementation of these programs and services, and greater responsiveness to local and widespread emergencies in communities that are diverse in nature. Strong local input on issues related to governance, programs and services is also vital.

Interconnectedness

Responsibility for public health is not exclusive to one ministry, nor to the local public health agencies. All too often, health units become a stopgap for inefficiencies or resource shortfalls in other areas. Better, stronger working relationships with traditional public health stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's Public Health Division and others whose policies have a significant impact on health (Environment, Family & Children's Services, Municipal Affairs and Housing, etc.) are critical. Collaboration with partners outside the health sector should be encouraged to create networks around core health issues. Also of benefit are wide public health representation on various committees across sectors and a stronger relationship with primary care. The efficiency of the system can only improve when public

health authorities can be confident that all government business is conducted with an eye on its health impacts.

Educated Public

A better-informed public on the importance and value of public health's role in society would help keep public health issues in the forefront of politicians' minds and act as a catalyst for change. Therefore, any system should provide for the raising of public awareness of the importance and positive long-term impact of public health. To further mobilize resources around key issues, public health needs to capitalize the current public confidence in the profession.

Strong Provincial Association

Public health in Ontario would benefit from strong representation before governments. As the representative body of member public health units in Ontario, alPHa needs to create a clear and consistent voice of public health at the federal, provincial and local levels. It needs to provide both direct and indirect assistance to members by:

- advocating for public health needs, particularly greater investments into the sector;
- facilitating information exchange among partners;
- raising public health's profile to decision-makers, media and the public;
- linking with other sectors; and
- providing value-added goods and services.

The framework for a strong public health system and a healthy population is very much in place in Ontario. There is strong legislation, sound philosophy and plenty of expertise. There is little debate about the core public health principles, and its essential functions. These form the basis of policy that already exists. The challenges lie elsewhere, in the realms of resources, co-ordination and education. The commitment from all stakeholders to addressing these challenges will require a strong emphasis on maintaining the profile of these principles and functions. It has been argued over and again recently that the public health system is invisible at its most efficient. It is becoming increasingly clear that it is in fact maximizing its visibility that will make it as efficient as it is supposed to be.