

alPHa's members are
the public health units
in Ontario.

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Boards of Health
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Council of Ontario
Medical Officers of
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**Affiliate
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in Ontario

Association of
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Health Promotion
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Ontario Association of
Public Health Dentistry

Ontario Association of
Public Health Nursing
Leaders

Ontario Dietitians in
Public Health

December 14, 2021

The Honourable Christine Elliott, MPP
Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
College Park, 5th Floor
777 Bay St.
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Dear Minister Elliott:

RE: Provincial Strategies to Control Omicron Variant of COVID-19

On behalf of the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) and its member Medical Officers of Health, Boards of Health and Affiliate organizations, I am writing to ask you to strongly consider province-wide strategies to protect Ontarians from the rising tide of COVID infections and its highly transmissible Omicron variant, including clear public messaging about the gravity of the situation and implementing stronger province-wide restrictions as needed.

Last week's announcement of maintaining the proof-of-vaccination requirement for non-essential activities and the recent expansion of vaccine eligibility to 5-11-year-olds and booster shots for 50+ were welcome and important steps towards our eventual return to normal. But the emergence of the Omicron variant, which is said to be as much as 10 times more transmissible than previous ones has unfortunately moved the goalposts.

Presentations of modeling data from the Science Advisory Table last week paint an alarming picture of the Omicron variant contributing to a steep and rapid increase in COVID-19 transmission, with doubling times measured in days and not weeks, and risk of infection as many as three times higher even for those who are fully vaccinated. We have seen this play out in other jurisdictions, and it has already begun in Ontario.

This will unfold very quickly in the coming weeks, at a pace that cannot be mitigated in through the vaccinations that are taking place now. We certainly support any effort to maximize vaccination of children 5-11, reach Ontarians who have not yet had first or second doses, and of course provide everyone with the third doses that have been shown to restore protection against Omicron to levels similar to those for the previous variants. The reality is that even with maximum effort, the benefit is unlikely to be seen until well into the new year.

This new wave we are facing is substantial and its effects will be felt throughout the province. If we are to manage it with any success, it will be critically important for all Ontarians to fully understand the gravity of the immediate situation, the importance of maintaining compliance with existing public health measures (e.g. masking, distancing, self-screening, testing if symptomatic) and the need for additional measures that reduce physical interaction as much as practicable in all settings. This messaging must be clear, persuasive, and consistent and must come from leadership at all levels, starting with the provincial government, to motivate individual and collective action to respond to the danger that we are facing.

After a relatively calm autumn, we are observing that the prevailing sense among the public is that we are emerging from the pandemic and there is very little understanding of the threat that is suddenly before us. This has resulted in an understandable and noticeable reduction in adherence to the simple measures (masking, limiting inessential interactions, distancing, avoiding indoor gatherings) that kept us safer in the earlier stages of the pandemic, which is especially concerning as the holidays approach along with the accompanying travel and gatherings that are no longer seen as risky. The urgency of our current situation must be communicated strongly and immediately to reinforce the need to change individual behaviour in the coming weeks.

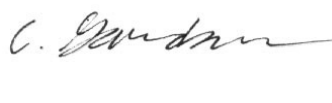
We are also confident that reinstating some of the province-wide public health measures will be necessary to stem the Omicron tide. As you are aware, this is already being done in several public health units in Ontario and it is only a matter of time before they are required in all of them. We understand that there is very little appetite anywhere for the kinds of restrictive measures that were in place at the beginning of the pandemic and again during its third wave, and we understand that such measures have significant negative consequences. To avoid these in the future, we urge you to consider immediate reinstatement of some of the restrictions such as the workplace capacity limits that were in place earlier this fall and gathering limits for indoor and outdoor settings, as well as extending proof-of-vaccination requirements to additional venues where it is possible to do so and requiring mandatory vaccinations in additional workplaces, starting with all health care settings not already included. These interventions have proven their worth and effectiveness throughout the pandemic. We know that they will work again.

Even before the emergence of the Omicron variant, many parts of Ontario's health system, including public health units and hospitals, were reaching the limits of their COVID-19 response capacity. We must do everything we can now to prevent this new wave from overwhelming it. The ongoing leadership role of the province will be indispensable.

Sincerely,



Dr. Paul Roumeliotis
President, alPHA



Dr. Charles Gardner
Chair, Council of Ontario
Medical Officers of Health
(COMOH)



Wess Garrod,
Chair, Boards of Health
Section

COPY: Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Alison Blair, Associate Deputy Minister, Pandemic Response and Recovery

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA) is a not-for-profit organization that provides leadership to the boards of health and public health units in Ontario. alPHA advises and lends expertise to members on the governance, administration and management of health units. The Association also collaborates with governments and other health organizations, advocating for a strong, effective and efficient public health system in the province. Through policy analysis, discussion, collaboration, and advocacy, alPHA's members and staff act to promote public health policies that form a strong foundation for the improvement of health promotion and protection, disease prevention and surveillance services in all of Ontario's communities.