
TO: Chair and members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health:

1. **Receive this Report for information.**
2. **Send a letter to the Provincial Government requesting the release of a Provincial Alcohol Strategy.**

Key Points

- The Government of Ontario committed to a Provincial Alcohol Strategy (Strategy) in December 2015 which has not yet been released.¹
- Alcohol modernization has resulted in the expansion of alcohol sales in grocery stores, farmers markets and online across Ontario.²
- It is well established that increased access to alcohol results in an increase in alcohol use and misuse. A Strategy is urgently needed to mitigate harms.³

Discussion

Since early 2014, the Ontario Government, led by the Ministry of Finance, has taken calculated measures to rapidly and fundamentally transform the retail sale and distribution of alcohol. As of March 2017, 130 independent and large grocery stores have been authorized to sell alcohol with up to 450 authorized grocery stores planned.² Other changes to alcohol distribution have also taken place such as the introduction of the LCBO's e-commerce and delivery platform.

In December 2015, the Government of Ontario committed to a Strategy but has not released it yet. It is important that the government holds to its promise of a Strategy as this report outlines the harms associated with increased access to alcohol through retail sales and distribution. A Strategy would assist Public Health and partner agencies address these risks and reduce the harms associated with alcohol use. Appendix "A" outlines the actions taken to increase access to alcohol across the province since April 2014.

Public Health Concerns

Alcohol use remains a leading preventable cause of morbidity and mortality in Ontario.⁴ Four-in-five adults, in Ontario, have used alcohol in the past year and more than 1-in-6 of all drinkers are exceeding Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines.⁵ Alarming, nearly 1-in-10 alcohol users report weekly sessions of binge drinking.⁶

Alcohol is no ordinary commodity. Alcohol causes addiction, disease and social disruption and is one of the leading risk factors for disability and death in Canada. Alcohol has significant costs to the individual and society from both a health and financial perspective. These costs include health care, law enforcement, prevention, lost productivity and premature mortality. As such, a comprehensive, evidence-based approach is critical to limit these harms.

Research has long established that increasing access to alcohol will lead to an increase in alcohol use and misuse.³ It is thus reasonable to be concerned that actions to increase access to alcohol may directly contribute to increases in alcohol-related morbidity and mortality, in Ontario. The potential harm outcome was, in fact, anticipated by the government in its 2015 budget, wherein the Ministry of Finance committed to work with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to develop initiatives to support the safe consumption of alcohol.⁶

The Ontario Government has committed to social responsibility as it increases the availability of alcohol. However, the Strategy has not yet been released to address the increased harm by increasing access to alcohol.

Appendix "A" documents the Provincial governments' announcements overtime to increase access to alcohol, in Ontario, from April 2014 to February 2017. Although access to alcohol has proceeded at a steady rate, the development of initiatives to support the safe consumption of alcohol are currently absent.

Recognizing the harms due to alcohol and the additional impact that increasing access to alcohol, in Ontario, are likely to create, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) is calling on the Government of Ontario to fulfil its commitment (as outlined in its 2015 budget) to develop a comprehensive Strategy that outlines initiatives to support safe consumption of alcohol.

Conclusion

Alcohol availability is rapidly expanding across Ontario through grocery stores, farmers markets and online sales. Despite a 2015 announcement from the Ontario Government committing to a Strategy for the province, none has been released. Increased alcohol availability is directly related to an increase in alcohol related morbidity and mortality and WDGPH is calling on the government to fulfil its promise and deliver the much needed Strategy.

Ontario Public Health Standard

Chronic Disease Prevention

Requirements:

1. The board of health shall conduct epidemiological analysis of surveillance data, including monitoring of trends over time, emerging trends, and priority populations, in accordance with the Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2008 (or as current), in the areas of:
 - Alcohol use.
6. The board of health shall work with municipalities to support healthy public policies and the creation or enhancement of supportive environments in recreational settings and the built environment regarding the following topics:
 - Alcohol use.
7. The board of health shall increase the capacity of community partners to coordinate and develop regional/local programs and services related to:
 - Alcohol use.
11. The board of health shall increase public awareness in the following areas:
 - Alcohol use.
12. The board of health shall provide advice and information to link people to community programs and services on the following topics:
 - Alcohol use.

WDGPH Strategic Direction(s)

Check all that apply:

Health Equity

We will provide programs and services that integrate health equity principles to reduce or eliminate health differences between population groups.

Organizational Capacity

We will improve our capacity to effectively deliver public health programs and services.

Service Centred Approach

We are committed to providing excellent service to anyone interacting with Public Health.

Building Healthy Communities

We will work with communities to support the health and well-being of everyone.

Health Equity

The relationship between alcohol and the social determinants of health (SDOH) is complex, particularly from an equity perspective. Social, economic and health factors can directly and indirectly impact alcohol consumption.⁷ Alcohol misuse can both create and exacerbate vulnerable situations. For example, lack of employment options may lead to alcohol misuse as a coping mechanism or alcohol misuse may lead to unemployment.⁸

Alcohol related harms are primarily influenced by the volume of alcohol consumed and the pattern of alcohol consumption. For a given amount of consumption, low income populations may experience disproportionately higher levels of alcohol-attributable harm.⁷ In other words, people living in poverty may be less able to mitigate the consequences of alcohol misuse than people who have higher social or economic status.

While no single social or economic determinant dominates, factors such as income, sex and age have been shown to have significant impact on alcohol and health outcomes.

Facts:

Income:

- In Ontario, individuals in higher income groups are more likely to drink and undertake risky drinking than those in low income groups.⁹ However, individuals living in low income tend to experience a greater number and increased severity of consequences associated with alcohol even at similar intake levels. These consequences may include stigma, loss of earnings, unemployment and more barriers to healthcare access than higher income groups.⁸

Biological sex:

- Drinking and risky drinking rates are higher in men than women in Canada.¹⁰
- Risky drinking is currently on the rise among women, especially those aged 35 and older.¹⁰

- LGBTQ individuals, particularly women, are at greater risk for alcohol disorders and related problems.¹¹

Age:

- 19-24 year olds in Ontario have the highest rates of binge drinking (5 drinks for males/4 drinks for females on one occasion).⁴
- 30-34 year olds represent the highest rate of past year drinkers in Canada.¹¹
- Seniors (65+) do not have the highest rates of drinking or risky drinking but may be at increased risk of alcohol-related harms due to confounding factors such as underlying health issues, medication use, social isolation and an increased social acceptability of alcohol use amongst this generation of seniors.¹¹

A Strategy that includes methods to address inequities in alcohol-related harm in vulnerable populations is critical as populations with low income and with other socio-economic forms of disadvantage are more adversely effected by alcohol than high income and socially advantaged populations.

Appendices

Appendix “A” – Timeline for Ontario Government’s Modernization of Alcohol Retail.

References

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APPENDIX “A”

Timeline for Ontario Government's Modernization of Alcohol Retail

- **April 11, 2014:** The Minister of Finance [announced](#) the [Premier's Advisory Council on Government Assets](#) (the Council) to advise the Premier on maximising the value and performance of government business enterprises and Provincial assets, including the LCBO.
- **November 11, 2014:** The Council released its [initial report](#), *Retain and Gain: Making Ontario's Assets Work Better for Taxpayers and Consumers*, which provided an assessment on the current alcohol retail landscape.
- **April 16, 2015:** The Council released its final report on **beer sales**, *Striking the Right Balance: Modernizing Beer Retailing and Distribution in Ontario*, which provided recommendations to drastically alter access to beer, including authorising up to 450 grocery stores to sell alcohol. This report is no longer publicly available.
- **April 23, 2015:** The [2015 Ontario Budget](#) is released with a commitment to implement the recommendations in the Council's final report on beer sales. The Ministry of Finance commits to work with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to develop initiatives to support the safe consumption of alcohol (this will later be referred to as the **alcohol policy**).
- **May 26, 2015:** The government [announced](#) the *Making Healthier Choices Act*, which would have required, in part, the posting of **calorie information for alcoholic beverages** on menus and menu boards in restaurants, convenience stores, grocery stores and other food service premises with 20 or more locations in Ontario. However, the [final regulations](#) excluded alcoholic beverages.
- **September 22, 2015:** The [Master Framework Agreement](#) was announced between the province and the private owners of The Beer Store. This agreement made some changes to the operations at The Beer Store and LCBO and was necessary for the province to begin implementing its plan for the modernisation of alcohol retail sales.
- **December 15, 2015:** The government [announces](#) the beginning of **beer sales in grocery stores** with the authorisation of 58 independent and large grocery stores.
- **December 18, 2015:** The government [reiterated](#) its commitment to develop a 'comprehensive, **province wide Alcohol Policy**' to support the safe and responsible consumption of alcohol. This was first mentioned in the 2015 Ontario Budget.
- **February 4, 2016:** The Provincial Alcohol Prevention Steering Committee [met in-person with representatives](#) from MOHTLC to discuss the proposed alcohol policy. At the time, MOHTLC was accepting public input into the development of the alcohol policy and had hosted a conference call with health units.
- **February 18, 2016:** The Council [released its report](#) on **wine and spirit sales**, *Striking the Right Balance: Modernizing Wine and Spirits Retailing and Distribution in Ontario*, recommending (in part) to phase in wine and spirit sales at grocery stores in Ontario.
- **April 22, 2016:** The government [announces](#) the regulatory approach for the **sale cider** in grocery stores.
- **June 24, 2016:** The government [announces](#) the regulatory approach for the **sale of wine** in grocery stores and the [availability](#) of **ciders** in grocery stores.
- **July 26, 2016:** The LCBO [launched](#) its **e-commerce platform** with delivery options available, via Canada Post. The creation of the platform was [supported](#) by the provincial government and the Council's recommendations.
- **October 6, 2016:** The government [announces](#) plans to further expand and support local wine and cider sales at **farmers' markets**. This was preceded by a 2-year pilot project.
- **October 28, 2016:** The government [announces](#) the beginning of **wine sales in grocery stores**, with the authorisation of 67 independent and large grocers. Grocers are required to follow [requirements and regulations](#) that are overseen by the AGCO.
- **February 6, 2017:** A new [round of bidding](#) opened up for 80 locations to sell beer and cider. Up to **210 grocery stores** are expected to be authorised to sell alcohol by June 2017.