

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Primary Care Collaborative calls for more supports for essential workers and workplaces, more robust community vaccination rollout & isolation supports

Toronto – April 17, 2021 – The organizations of the Primary Care Collaborative echo the alarms being sounded by our healthcare and public health colleagues since Friday. There was no doubt given the modelling from the Ontario COVID-19 Science Table Advisory Board on Friday afternoon that additional measures were and are necessary to help slow the spread of the virus in our province, particularly the spread of the more contagious and deadly Variants of Concern. Some of the measures taken by the Ontario government yesterday – notably limiting non-essential travel, extending the stay at home order, and expanding the number of vaccines available to hotspot areas – will indeed help reduce transmission and ultimately lower the burden on our health system.

However, we are deeply concerned that these measures are not nearly enough to stop outbreaks from happening in the highest risk environments – essential workplaces and congregate settings. We are seeking immediate action on the following:

- robust paid sick day supports; the temporary, retroactive federal sickness benefit maxes out at \$450 a week after tax and cannot be used immediately by a worker who may be experiencing COVID symptoms; we need emergency sick day supports that allow anyone who is experiencing symptoms to stay home without fear of losing their job;
- access to adequate PPE, including N95 masks for all congregate settings and essential workplaces, including long-term care and retirement homes;
- expansion of rapid testing, and connections to local community supports for people who test positive and need to isolate immediately;
- defining “essential” workplaces more narrowly, including high risk workplaces that continue to be sources of outbreaks.

Without these decisive actions, more lives will be lost. Also, our healthcare workers and the health system will continue toward catastrophic scenarios. Collectively, primary care providers will continue to step up and do what we can to keep essential services in place, to encourage cancer screening, to keep people healthy and out of hospitals, and to continue vaccinating, but we need help. Primary care also continues to play key roles directly in COVID-19 supports, helping people isolate, get tested in community, and by rolling out the vaccination and vaccine information in hotspots and meeting people where they’re at. Support for us to continue doing this work and to scale it up across the province is essential to slowing the spread and flattening the curve of the third wave in every community.

Workplace enforcement measures alone are not enough to keep people safe in essential workplaces. Paid time off must be in place so people can book and get vaccinated and stay home when not feeling well, minimizing the risk of spread. These are proven, evidence-based interventions that can help get us through this wave of the pandemic sooner, with less suffering.

Without every possible measure being taken to protect the people working in essential workplaces – many of whom are marginalized and from racialized and newcomer communities – these places will also eventually be forced to close, as there is further spread and more and more people get sick and die from COVID-19. And workers will bring more spread back into their already devastated families and communities.

We also remain deeply concerned that yesterday's modelling has led to a closure of outdoor activities, and an emphasis on enforcement of the stay at home order through policing, "carding" and ticketing of people out in public. These are actions that are known to harm mental health of people while not measurably reducing the risk of COVID-19 spreading. These measures will also cause disproportionate harm to racialized and other marginalized communities. We need to approach people at the most risk with support, empathy and effective ways to stay safe. At a time when we need to further build trust to support our vaccination rollout, these enforcement measures, especially those taken heavy-handedly, will only push us further from where we need to be. It's in that spirit that we acknowledge and support the enforcement agencies and police forces who've gone on the record saying they will not be stopping people in public.

The voices of our hospitals and others on frontlines of care, and especially among the people and families facing the worst -- the loss of loved ones to the virus – must be heard. The exhaustion, frustration and anger of our front-line health workers, our doctors, nurses, therapists and others who are desperately battling the virus 24/7, must be heeded. Half-measures will not get us out of this pandemic – the right decisions driven by the evidence will. As noted by Dr. Adalsteinn Brown on Friday: "There is little point to looking back at hypotheticals or what was or wasn't done in the weeks and months past. We must notice what needs to be done now, and act swiftly to protect lives and our health system."

For press inquiries or to schedule an interview, please contact:

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About the Primary Care Collaborative (PCC):

We are a coalition of primary care organizations collectively representing 14,000 family doctors, 1,000+ primary care nurse practitioners, 286 primary care teams, 28 Indigenous primary care teams, including northern, rural, and remote teams in Ontario. This alliance of comprehensive primary care organizations joined together by common purpose to build on the collaborative work during the COVID-19 pandemic as we move towards recovery in a time of health system transformation. The PCC provides a collective and cohesive voice with the purpose of advancing equitable person-centred primary care in Ontario and is focused on influencing policy by creating a unified voice towards resolving barriers or challenges that prevent comprehensive primary care from being the foundation of the health system.