



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Ontario



October 20, 2021

Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier Ford,

Thank you for your invitation to provide our input on vaccine mandates in hospitals and other health care settings. AdvantAge Ontario, Addictions and Mental Health Ontario (AMHO), the Alliance for Healthier Communities, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA Ontario), Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO), and the Ontario Community Support Organization (OCSA) are six community organizations that make up Community Health Ontario (CHO), and we are pleased to provide a joint response on this critical issue. As you can see, we represent a continuum of community health interests, and our response is framed by the holistic perspective we bring to the health of Ontarians.

We wish to express our support for a province wide vaccine mandate that applies to all health care workers in all settings, with medical exemptions only. Our response echoes the submission from the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) and adds a community health perspective. This mandate is needed to protect the patients, clients, children and residents we care for and to ensure the overall stability and security of the entire health system – both acute and community care. We know that vaccines are the most effective strategy against COVID-19, and that unvaccinated, or partially vaccinated health care workers pose an ongoing threat to patient, client and resident safety. Within this common framework of a vaccine mandate for health care workers, we recommend that each organization retain the ability to address implementation issues according to their own circumstances and needs, including timing and consequences for failing to meet these requirements.

Your letter asks us to evaluate how a vaccine mandate would benefit hospitals and points to the fact that Ontario has a relatively high rate of overall vaccination with few hospital-related COVID-19 outbreaks. While we agree that these are positive developments, this critical issue should be considered through the lens of the entire healthcare system. We know that outbreaks persist in settings beyond hospitals, including congregate settings, with the vast majority of cases, hospitalizations and deaths occurring among the unvaccinated. This is a significant risk within community health since our patients, clients and residents are among the most vulnerable.

Further, we believe the province must also consider the fact that *not* introducing a vaccine mandate in hospitals and other health care settings would not only continue to expose patients

and clients to the risk of the virus, but also create staffing challenges that could impact patient and client care in other areas of the health care system as vaccine hesitant workers move to hospitals or other areas of the broader health system where there is no vaccination mandate.

Unfortunately, we are already seeing this happen. Due to the vaccine mandate being limited to long-term care and with inconsistent vaccine policy in other areas of the health system as Directive #6 was not expanded to include primary health care, unvaccinated workers are moving from one setting to another. For example, in children's mental health, the government mandate applies only to live-in treatment programs. As a result, unvaccinated workers have continued working elsewhere in the health system; they are not getting the vaccine because they know they have other options, leading to asymmetrical and potentially dangerous outcomes in the community healthcare system. This is especially true in regions of the province that are in most need of healthcare workers, such as in Northern Ontario.

A consistent vaccine mandate across health care settings would help to ensure safety throughout the health system and create a level playing field for health care providers. We know that some health care workers perform their work in more than one setting, and having a consistent policy, regardless of care setting, provides a more equitable approach and safeguards patients, residents, and clients irrespective of where they are receiving health care services.

Premier, your letter points to other provinces and asks whether Ontario health care staff would exit the sector altogether due to a provincewide health care vaccine mandate, further exacerbating Ontario's health and human resources (HHR) challenges. What we know right now is that the partial vaccine mandate currently in place is causing HHR challenges—because unvaccinated workers are able to choose to remain unvaccinated by switching care settings—and that both short- and long-term solutions are badly needed to address the ongoing HHR challenges in the community health sector. Burnout, low wages, and the lack of wage parity for health care workers across sectors have created ongoing challenges related to recruitment and retention in the community health sector. We also recognize these impacts on recruitment and retention of staff from underserved or high priority populations as we strive to have representation among healthcare workers from these communities, in our efforts to provide culturally safe services. An opportunity to discuss and collaborate on solutions to these challenges would be welcome.

Finally, given that vaccines are currently unavailable for those under 11, we further recommend looking at strategies for increasing vaccine uptake and vaccine policies for adults who are working in the ecosystem that supports children beyond health care.

For the safety and wellbeing of patients, clients, and staff who have worked so hard these past 18 months, Ontario needs a healthcare worker vaccine mandate. We would be happy to meet with you to discuss this challenging situation in greater detail and discuss solutions to the ongoing health and human resources challenges faced by the community health sector.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our perspective.

Sincerely,

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