



June 12, 2020

Hon. Christine Elliott
Ministry of Health
777 Bay St., 5th Floor
Toronto, ON
M7A 2J3

Re: Pandemic Pay for ASO-based harm reduction workers

Dear Minister Elliott;

In the April 25th announcement of the Pandemic Pay program designed to support employees on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response, we noted that those providing harm reduction services at AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs) were *not* included in the list of eligible workers.

As a collective network of 44 community-based organizations, the Ontario AIDS Network (OAN) and its members advocate that the Ministry of Health amend Pandemic Pay eligibility rules to ensure all ASO-based front-line harm reduction workers are included. We call on the Ministry of Health to address these pay inequities and to recognize the critical contributions of harm reduction workers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. ASO-based harm reduction workers *are* essential and should be entitled to equitable Pandemic Pay.

At present, those delivering harm reduction services, including harm reduction workers, peers, and nursing staff and others, are delivering services at approximately 30 unique ASOs throughout Ontario. Since March of this year, our harm reduction workers have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis *and* the persistent opioid and overdose crisis, doing their part to ensure the health and wellbeing of many of the most vulnerable people in our communities. They play an essential role in contributing to community wellness by supporting people who use drugs with critical harm reduction services and supplies. This work significantly reduces the burden on the broader health care sector by keeping people out of hospital, reducing HIV and STBBI infections, reducing overdose deaths, and reducing transmission of COVID-19.

For months, these essential workers have stepped in and stepped up. During this time, these ASO-based harm reduction workers have also responded to the COVID-19 pandemic through the delivery of COVID-19 screening, directing clients to COVID-19 testing, and supporting people with the necessary resources to self-isolate. While these activities significantly contribute to the overall success of Public Health teams and hospitals, they have placed a tremendous additional burden on our staff. The absence of Pandemic Pay for harm reduction workers in ASOs has also



created inequity and unnecessary friction between staff performing similar functions, causing lowered morale and negatively impacting work environments.

The delivery of safe, quality harm reduction service is the result of interprofessional teamwork. Harm reduction workers at ASOs work in close partnership and collaboration with Public Health Units and addiction treatment programs already receiving Pandemic Pay; and, as such, are an essential part of Ontario's mental health and addiction system. While not housed within a hospital or Public Health Unit, we firmly believe ASO-based harm reduction workers must be made equal to their collaborators and colleagues whose roles presently fall within the scope of eligibility to receive Pandemic Pay. Likewise, our ASO-based, front-line, harm reduction staff, peers and nurses and others assume similar risk of COVID-19 exposure to their colleagues working in these settings. The OAN believes that harm reduction workers' exclusion and ineligibility is arbitrary and deeply inequitable.

The OAN and its members urge the Government of Ontario to immediately expand Pandemic Pay eligibility to include ASO-based front-line harm reduction staff, thereby recognizing their efforts and contributions and acknowledging their role as essential workers through equitable pay.

While we are always appreciative of thoughtful, written replies from the Ministry of Health, we hope to receive an action-oriented, timely response in place of a letter acknowledging this communication.

Thank you, Minister Elliot, for your urgent attention to this most crucial matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Shannon Ryan".

Shannon Ryan
Executive Director
Ontario AIDS Network

Holly Gauvin
Elevate NWO

Brian Lester
Regional HIV/AIDS Connection

Glenn Checkley
Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy

Glen Walker
Positive Living Niagara



Nick Boyce
Ontario Harm Reduction Network

John Maxwell
AIDS Committee of Toronto

Janet Rowe
PASAN

Michael Brennan
AIDS Committee of Windsor

Stacey L. Mayhall
AIDS Committee of North Bay and Area

Gareth Henry
Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention

Khaled Salam
AIDS Committee of Ottawa

Haran Vijayanathan
Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention

Michel Lussier
ACTION POSITIVE VIH/Sida

Hope Ramsay
MOYO Health and Community Services

Linda Truglia and Lorraine Kelly
Bruce House

Richard Rainville
Reseau ACCESS Network

Maureen Owino
Committee for Accessible AIDS Treatment

Adrian Betts
AIDS Committee of Durham Region

Charles Shames
PARN- Your Community AIDS Resource

Gavin Demonte
CAYR Community Connections

Jillian Watkins
HIV/AIDS Resources and Community Health

Gilles Charette
HIV/AIDS Regional Services

Wangari Tharao
Women's Health in Women's Hands

Ruth Cameron
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Africans in Partnership Against AIDS

Laurie Edmiston
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Tim McClemon
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Andrea Tsuji
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2-Spirited People of the First Nations

Ryan Peck
HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario (HALCO)