NEWS RELEASE

Ontario urgently needs a provincial alcohol strategy: health and social sectors

(Toronto, May 13, 2024) – A coalition of organizations across public health, research and advocacy, and community mental health and addictions are calling on the province to develop a comprehensive provincial alcohol strategy to promote the health and safety of people in Ontario.

In a letter released to the province today, the coalition points out that despite plans to introduce alcohol in an additional 8,500 stores across Ontario, including convenience stores, the province does not have a coordinated action plan for reducing harms from alcohol use.

Alcohol-related harms cost Ontario more than $7 billion annually, which is greater than the costs of harms from tobacco and opioids combined. This includes a variety of acute and chronic health harms, including more than 200 disease and injury conditions, and at least nine cancers.

The last time access to alcohol in retail stores increased in the province, the number of emergency department visits attributable to alcohol grew by more than 24,000 in two years. The coalition warns that further expansion of alcohol sales will add strain on an already overstretched healthcare system.

Ontario's health and social policy sectors have repeatedly called for a provincial alcohol strategy. The Canadian Alcohol Policy Evaluation Project, which compares alcohol and other policy domains across the country, gave Ontario a failing grade in 2023. Last month, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health also recommended that the province develop a comprehensive alcohol strategy in his 2024 annual report.

Ontarians who share concerns about the lack of support for alcohol-related harms are encouraged to visit Alcohol and Health.

The letter and accompanying evidence brief can be downloaded here.

Quotes:

"Drinking any type of alcohol increases your risk of at least 9 different types of cancers. Over 40% of people in Canada are not aware that alcohol consumption increases the risk of cancer, and many don't realize they're drinking unsafe amounts. An alcohol strategy is integral to reducing alcohol-related harm, particularly the risk of cancer, and improving health outcomes in Ontario." ***Kelly Masotti, Vice President - Advocacy, Canadian Cancer Society***

"As alcohol access increases, it's important to ensure that the health of Ontarians also remains a priority. Creating a comprehensive alcohol strategy will minimize the negative impact of alcohol to those most at risk in our communities." ***Camille Quenneville, Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario***

"The Province of Ontario has a choice to make. It either works to protect the health and well-being of its citizens and safeguards the demands on its over-burdened health care systems, or it

advances the interests of the alcohol and convenience store lobby. It cannot do both." Ian Culbert, Executive Director, Canadian Public Health Association

"Alcohol-related harms are high in Ontario, and they are expected to rise in the years to come with the expansion of alcohol availability through private retail outlets. The costs of alcohol harms far exceed the revenues. There is a need for coordination and leadership across government to most effectively respond to these harms. This can best be achieved through a provincial alcohol strategy, developed in partnership with public health and community safety stakeholders, and independent from the alcohol industry." ***Dr. Leslie Buckley, Chief of Addictions, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)***

"The evidence says that drinking is already a leading cause of death in young people. With the expansion of the availability of alcohol in Ontario, it is critically important that this is accompanied by significant investments in harm reduction measures, education and a comprehensive strategy to prevent health risks to children, youth and families associated with alcohol use." ***Tatum Wilson, Chief Executive Officer, Children's Mental Health Ontario.***

"Our healthcare system is in crisis. Families adversely affected by alcohol are suffering. We look forward to the day that all governments carefully measure the safety and well-being of people alongside the commercial interests of the alcohol industry." ***Angie Hamilton, Executive Director, Families for Addiction Recovery.***

"It seems these days everything is a crisis. Unless the sky is imminently falling, no-one pays attention. The issue with alcohol is almost the opposite. It's so pervasive and embedded in our society that the negatives are just factored in as "normal" and get glossed over. Once you pull back the curtain though, the science is very clear that effective alcohol policies save money and save lives. We would hope that our government follows best evidence to prevent both short and long term damage by increasing alcohol access." ***Shannon Bourke, Director of Regional Programs and Dr. Fawaad Iqbal, Durham Regional Cancer Centre, Lakeridge Health***

"Recognizing that alcohol causes harm to people and communities across Ontario, the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) supports the Ontario Government's commitment to provide additional resources towards social responsibility and public-health efforts. Creating a Provincial Alcohol Strategy for Ontario would help to guide this work and would benefit the health and well-being of all Ontarians." ***Kevin Churchill, Board President, Ontario Public Health Association***

"RNAO has a long history of advocating for public policy that prevents and deals with the extensive health and social harms alcohol consumption causes. Not only is alcohol a known potent carcinogen; there is also a direct causal link between the negative impact of alcohol consumption and more than 200 additional health conditions. This is why nurses call for an evidence-based provincial alcohol strategy. Government can't turn a blind eye to the wreckage that irresponsible alcohol policy produces." **Dr. Claudette Holloway, President, Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO)**

About the coalition

The letter and evidence brief are the result of a collaborative effort from 15 federal and provincial organizations who believe strongly that Ontario should commit to a comprehensive alcohol strategy.

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For more information, contact:

Jennifer Ratcliff
Senior Strategist, Communications
Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario
E: jratcliff@ontario.cmha.ca