

Coalition urges immediate action on health care strategy following alcohol retail expansion

(Toronto, Oct. 31, 2024) – With the final milestone in Ontario's alcohol retail expansion complete, a coalition of public health, research and community mental health and addictions organizations are once again calling for a comprehensive health care strategy.

The organizations published [an open letter](#) urging the Ontario government to develop a co-ordinated action plan to accompany the retail expansion when it was announced. The letter highlighted the variety of health harms associated with increased availability and consumption, including a causal role in more than 200 disease and injury conditions and at least nine cancers. Since then, the retail expansion has continued with no acknowledgement of the health and safety risks accompanying increased availability.

While the province remains silent, in some areas of the province the coalition's warnings are already coming to light. In northwestern Ontario, for example, where alcohol availability is nearly double that of the provincial average, the local health unit is warning that their emergency visits due to alcohol are 13 times higher in their region than the provincial rate.

The province's last-minute addition of allowing the sale of fortified wine in convenience stores has raised even more concern for youth and vulnerable communities. Fortified wine has a significantly higher alcohol content relative to other permitted beverages at a lower relative cost.

"We're particularly concerned about individuals in recovery, as this increased availability puts them at risk," said Camile Quenneville, CEO, Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario. "Without a co-ordinated action plan for reducing harms from alcohol use, this expansion will add strain to a provincial health care system already struggling with limited resources and supports."

In the absence of an alcohol health strategy, the coalition has outlined 10 recommendations to mitigate alcohol-related harms, many of which follow existing retail guidelines of other substances like cannabis. This includes providing municipalities with the ability to use zoning to determine where new alcohol retail locations are acceptable, banning alcohol sales at gas stations, and ensuring that alcohol retail not be allowed within 150 metres of a school or daycare.

"Expanding alcohol access without a comprehensive health strategy is a choice to ignore the science on alcohol-related harms," said Ian Culbert, Executive Director of the Canadian Public Health Association. "We're seeing the toll in real time—emergency rooms overwhelmed, communities impacted, and our most vulnerable at risk. Ontario must act now to prioritize health and safety over profits."

The alcohol retail expansion across the province began at the start of the summer and included expanding alcohol retail to more than 8,500 new stores across the province. Today marks the last step of the expansion, with eligible grocery and big-box stores able to sell beer, cider, wine and ready-to-drink beverages, including in large pack sizes.

For more information, visit AlcoholandHealth.ca.

About the coalition

The letter and evidence brief are the result of a collaborative effort from 10 federal and provincial organizations who believe strongly that Ontario should commit to a comprehensive alcohol strategy. Members include: *Addictions and Mental Health Ontario (AMHO), Canadian Cancer Society (CCS), Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario (CMHA-O), Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA), Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO), Families for Addiction Recovery (FAR), Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) and Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (RNAO).*

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