

## **O. Create a Provincial Pandemic-Response Strategy and Plan**

Submitted by: Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce. Co-sponsored by: North Bay and District Chamber of Commerce, Timmins Chamber of Commerce, Sault Ste Marie Chamber of Commerce, and Sarnia Lambton Chamber of Commerce

### **Issue**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed Ontario's vulnerabilities in its response strategy to health pandemics. Over the past year, the province has faced challenges related to its critical health-care supply chains, infrastructure, and other crisis-response tools. The Government of Ontario should conduct a thorough review of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic and develop a pandemic-response strategy to help manage any future health-care related crises.

### **Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented health and economic shock for which the province, along with the rest of the world, was underprepared. The early days of the pandemic saw communities around the province struggle with procuring critical Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplies for not just average citizens, but frontline health care and essential service workers as well. There were reported shortages in N95 masks, gloves, gowns, face shields, and other equipment. The province responded to these concerns by launching a Workplace PPE Supplier Directory in May 2020, but the initial shortages had already delayed Ontario's safe reopening by several weeks.<sup>225</sup>

During normal times, Ontario has relied on its trading partners to supply many materials necessary to power the economy, but due to a variety of reasons, those relationships were not enough in the early days of the crisis and left the province at a disadvantage. In early April 2020, Canada's N95 mask orders from American manufacturer 3M were disrupted due to the US President's invocation of the US Defense Production Act; a shipment of masks ordered by the Government of Ontario were held at the US border in April 2020, but later released; and in early May 2020, news reports indicated that N95 masks imported from China did not meet Canadian health standards and could not be used against COVID-19. These situations eroded trust in our trading partners, and should be seen as an indication that Ontario, despite being a trade-reliant economy, should not rely on other countries to supply critical materials needed to combat a health pandemic.

The provincial government acted to address some of these issues, with multiple investments to increase domestic PPE manufacturing capacity, including launching the Ontario Together fund in April<sup>226</sup> and the Workplace PPE Supplier Directory in May.<sup>227</sup>

Additionally, the differences between Ontario's various measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, including states of emergencies, stay-at-home orders, business regulations, etc., and that of other neighboring provinces like Quebec has also contributed to the entire country's response to COVID-19. The level of coordination between provinces and the federal government in communications and response strategies, including supports for businesses, has led to public confusion, and ultimately some erosion of trust among citizens and businesses.

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<sup>225</sup> <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/56954/ontario-announces-additional-workplaces-that-can-reopen>

<sup>226</sup> <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/56537/ontario-joins-forces-with-the-private-sector-to-fight-covid-19>

<sup>227</sup> <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/56954/ontario-announces-additional-workplaces-that-can-reopen>

Various factors led to a delay in the provincial, and national, rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines. The federal government is procuring these vaccines from manufacturers while the provinces are administering it to the population. Despite the federal government signing contracts for multiple doses of vaccine per citizen, vaccine supply shortages still remain an issue as we enter 2021. Part of the reason is the inability to manufacture the vaccine domestically. The province should consider policies to encourage domestic manufacturing of critical, pandemic-related supplies, including vaccines.

Business are doing their part. Many businesses across the country showed organizational flexibility and modified their operations in response to COVID-19 to produce needed PPE equipment. But these were emergency responses to an unprecedented situation, and may not continue in the long-term after recovery, unless there is clear incentive to do so. These businesses may need support from the provincial government to continue such operations, and the Ontario Together fund has a key role to play in this.

The absence of a comprehensive strategic response to the pandemic has led to a difficult response to the pandemic, particularly in the second wave where confusing directives have made public compliance more difficult. The Government of Ontario should ensure these issues are mitigated in the future through the development of a pandemic-response strategy that can be relied upon in any future health-related crises. Part of this should be to conduct a comprehensive review of Ontario's response to COVID-19, and identify opportunities for improvement, inter-provincial partnerships, and plans for improved coordination with the federal government.

## **Recommendations**

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Ontario Government to:

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of the Ontario's response to COVID-19, with the aim of identifying opportunities for improvement, inter-provincial partnerships, and improved coordination with the federal government.
2. Engage the business community to create a provincial pandemic-response strategy to effectively respond to future health-related crises, paying particular attention to regulatory changes, infrastructure investments, communication strategies, etc., to ensure that business restrictions remain the last resort.
3. Review the performance of the Ontario Together fund and Supply Ontario and potential for expansion into a permanent investment fund for building capacity for domestic manufacturing of critical pandemic-related materials, including PPE, vaccines, and other related medical materials.

Effective Date: May 5, 2021

Sunset Date: May 5, 2024