

August 27, 2020

The [Ontario AIDS Network](#) Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs



[Ontario AIDS Network](#)

252 A Carlton Street, Suite 300

Toronto, Ontario M5A 2L1

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

[Kate Palbom](#), Manager of Policy and Advocacy

Ontario AIDS Network

E: kpalbom@oan.red

Ph: (416)-364-4555 ext: 320

Primary Recommendation

The Ontario AIDS Network (OAN) recommends the establishment of a non-profit stabilization fund made accessible to our province-wide network of 43 community-based agencies to continue to provide and adapt essential health and frontline services to people in Ontario who are living with HIV and at risk for HIV infection.

This echoes the primary recommendation put forward by the Ontario Non-profit Network (ONN) presented following the release of "[New Survey: The state of the Ontario non-profit sector three months into the COVID-19 crisis](#)"; and is submitted in solidarity with our colleague non-profit organizations now struggling to survive.

Membership and Objectives

The members of the OAN work together to establish a just and effective response to HIV and AIDS in Ontario.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted how the HIV public health response is delivered in Ontario and has placed significant workload strain on Ontario's HIV workforce. At the height of the pandemic, some organizations serving people living with HIV were forced to physically close their doors. But workers, staff, and volunteers have not stepped back. Instead, they have stepped up, adapting quickly to deliver services to some of our province's most vulnerable people. These services include, case management, peer support programs, harm reduction services and supplies, outreach, housing and housing support, testing, access to treatment, and HIV medical treatment. Today, most of our member organizations have partially reopened, however, adapting to keep pace with increased service-user needs and transforming service delivery modalities within the HIV sector has placed significant demand on our member organizations.

As the HIV sector looks toward the future and potential recovery, we acknowledge that our work must now include a heavy focus on development and deployment of new and novel program delivery models that enable a remote workforce *and* a socially distant workforce.

Financial support from the Ontario Government made accessible to OAN member organizations would position them to:

1. More effectively enhance their capacity to provide programs, resources, support, and health education information to service-users.

2. Establish a responsive virtual, “frontline” workforce equipped to reduce transmission of HIV in Ontario and engage service-users in treatment and care as the COVID-19 pandemic continues.
3. Help our sector continue developing safe and socially distant procedures that permit in-person services (where appropriate) and establish new health and safety protocols and procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE).
4. Recover deep and damaging donor and donation revenue losses caused by the cancellation of fundraising activities and events, and support creation of new approaches to fundraising.

Recommendations

On behalf of our members, the Ontario AIDS Network submits the below list of recommendations.

- Primarily, the Ontario AIDS Network (OAN) recommends establishment of a non-profit stabilization fund that is accessible to our province-wide network of 43 community-based agencies to continue to provide and adapt essential health and frontline services to people in Ontario who are living with HIV and at risk for HIV infection.
- We recommend the government designate harm reduction workers, nurses and other frontline staff/volunteers providing harm reduction, HIV testing, and medical services at AIDS service organizations (ASOs), as essential workers.
- Finally, accompanying essential worker status designation, we believe the above-mentioned harm reduction workers, nurses, and other frontline staff/volunteers must be entitled to retroactive, Pandemic Pay remuneration.

Impact of COVID-19 on Our Sector

This consultation process being conducted by the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs is critical to the future of our provincial response to HIV and to supporting the broader COVID-19 public health response during uncertain times.

COVID-19 has forced us to cancel essential community services, leadership events, and face-to-face working sessions that are critical to information-sharing concerning research, best practices, and emerging trends and challenges. The pandemic has also severed our in-person and face-to-face connections with service-users. These changes have forced us to reimagine and reconfigure how our

multi-disciplinary sector will continue to respond to the needs of people living with HIV at the local level and deliver province-wide HIV public health response.

Like many non-profit and frontline service organizations, COVID-19 has placed enormous strain on our frontline staff who are working long hours to innovate and adapt their work, programs, and services to ensure they continue to reach services-users.

We don't yet know the full impact that our member organizations' reduced capacity will have on our programs and initiatives and on those living with HIV.

HIV and COVID-19

These are stressful and isolating times for people living with HIV who:

- may be at an increased risk of becoming very ill if they contract COVID-19 and;
- due to closures, are isolated from their community of care and their peer and support systems.

Public health measures including physical distancing and isolation, and closures of non-essential services have created delays and barriers for people who require assistance with medical appointments, housing, harm reduction and drug-use services, and ongoing medical care. In particular, closures of HIV testing sites may have left people who need testing, treatment and support on the outside of the HIV health care and wellness system. Closures have also limited their access to critical HIV and STBBI prevention education services typically delivered during the HIV testing process.

Impact of Stabilization Funding on the HIV Sector

Provision of a non-profit stabilization fund would empower our sector to address a number of emerging needs.

Reduce disruptions and meet increased demand

- Limit further service disruptions by providing program funding to frontline organizations addressing increased client demand for:
 - Peer support programs
 - Case management
 - Harm reduction services and supplies
 - Harm reduction education
 - HIV testing
 - HIV treatment/medical care

- COVID-19 health information and education material
- Outreach and education programs
- Housing and housing support programs
- Food security programs
- Transportation programs
- Allow teams reopening and returning to work to do so more safely by providing additional resources for the development of safety procedures and protocols and sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE).

Establish a strong, interconnected virtual workforce

- Meet the overhead, technology and equipment costs required to provide staff working remotely with the appropriate resources and digital connectivity to continue their work.
- Increase paid sick leave and establish enhanced mental health and wellness budgets to support frontline organization staff seeking psychological and other wellness support.

Our Response to COVID-19

Historically, our sector has been agile and swift, taking action-oriented measures to advocate for the health and wellness of people living with and at risk for HIV. Since March, we have applied that same mentality to support our workforce in its transition to virtual work. We've been resourceful in making this transition and have been innovative in our efforts to maintain front line services.

In the past six months, OAN members have expanded their services to address food security, mental health, harm reduction, case management and more for new and existing clients. For executive directors, support workers, and peers, we've created online workshops, forums, and informal spaces to ensure our member network continues to work together to identify and address emerging needs while maintaining sector connectivity. OAN member organizations have created and disseminated resources and new programming around the province to help their clients navigate health and wellness services and stay safe during COVID-19.

Since March, our sector's harm reduction workers have remained, *without* Pandemic Pay, on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis *and* the persistent opioid and overdose crisis. Stabilization funding would

help to sustain their essential role in supporting people who use drugs with critical harm reduction services and supplies in a socially distanced way.

As the pandemic continues, our sector will not and cannot ignore the calls for systemic change and advocacy addressing health equity, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, and other forms of racialized discrimination. In addition to working within the context of COVID-19, we are engaging in the movement to expand and improve services, advocacy, and policies to address the barriers facing marginalized people living with HIV including, Black, Indigenous and racialized people.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge and commend the government's swift response to contain the impact of the pandemic to the greatest extent possible and its focus on those most severely affected and at risk, either by the virus itself or by the resulting economic and social consequences. We also acknowledge the government's ongoing reliance on the advice of medical and public health experts to guide and support its response, priority-setting, and decision-making.