

Towards tomorrow together

Pulling as one, Ontario can do much
better than simply recovering

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Contents

Towards tomorrow together	1
Pulling as one, Ontario can do much better than simply recovering	1
Healthy communities, healthy workforce	4
To increase capacity, and attract new employers and workers, focus on communities	4
Strong services and regulations, strong communities	5
To increase capacity, and attract new employers and workers, focus on communities ...	5
Invest to expand capacity in hospitals and long-term care	5
Invite workers to the table	7
Respect workers	7
Protect public services and resources	8
Expand public services	9
Conclusion	10
Endnotes	11

Towards tomorrow together

Pulling as one, Ontario can do much better than simply recovering

Recovery isn't enough.

From the very start of the pandemic, the majority of OPSEU/SEFPO's 180,000 members have courageously served on the front-lines in communities across the province. They have risked and sacrificed so much; they've risen to every challenge thrown in their path, and don't want Ontario and its workforce to go back to where it was in March of 2020.

It now seems ages ago, but our members haven't forgotten that before the pandemic struck, crises were already raging across our economy and our communities. Too few workers. An alarming growth in contract and other forms of precarious work. And too little investment in public services.

COVID-19 didn't cause the most serious problems facing our workforce, our economy, and our public services. But the virus has forced us to begin reckoning with the simple fact that you can't have four straight decades of government cuts, freezes, and underinvestment without serious consequences:

- Dangerously overcrowded hospitals have become the norm. In this age of "hallway health care," and growing nursing and other staffing shortages¹, patients must endure being left in corridors, boardrooms, and ambulances in the parking lot.
- Residents of long-term care homes, particularly those owned by large, for-profit corporations, are left to suffer with very little personal care and often face severe rations on necessities like clean bedding and incontinence products.
- A growing number of workers are finding themselves forced into work that is part-time and temporary, while offering few benefits and no stability or job security.
- Tens of thousands of people, including many children, are languishing on months- and even years-long waitlists for mental health care, social services, and affordable housing.
- Correctional workers and inmates face danger and difficulty because of the severe overcrowding, crumbling facilities, and heavy caseloads in our correctional system.
- Primary and secondary students must endure overcrowded classrooms, understaffed support, and crumbling schools. And then as post-secondary students, they face high tuitions and increasingly understaffed faculties and facilities.

¹. [*Canadian nurses are leaving in droves, worn down by 16 merciless months on the front lines of COVID-19*](#), The Globe and Mail, July 16, 2021

When COVID hit, those consequences and many more, came home to roost.

Already overburdened, our hospitals simply didn't have anywhere near the capacity needed to treat all those getting sick from the virus. And in long-term care, privatization cost more than 3,000 Ontarians their lives. Many corporate-owned homes were so overcrowded and understaffed that the virus ran rampant.

The result of the deadly chaos in our hospitals and long-term care homes: long and repeated lockdowns that have cost hundreds of thousands of people their livelihoods and savings.

So now, as Ontario finally begins to emerge from the pandemic, OPSEU/SEFPO is pleased the government has begun serious planning for our post-pandemic future.

Further in this document, we will offer more details on the five core principles our union has for making Ontario stronger, safer, and more prosperous than ever in the years ahead. In brief, they are:

1. **Invest to expand capacity in hospitals and long-term care.** COVID-19 was primarily a health care crisis, and it exposed deadly deficiencies in our health and long-term care systems. To address these deficiencies, and protect ourselves from future pandemics and crises, we must immediately begin to significantly increase public investment in health and long-term care.
2. **Invite workers to the table.** It's going to take the best we have to build back better – not just from government and from the private sector. Front-line workers have much to offer. Their experience, knowledge, and dedication are key provincial assets that shouldn't be squandered.
3. **Respect workers.** If the government is focused on the “three pillars” of economic recovery, strengthening Ontario's competitive position, and supporting workers, the first move is clear: repeal Bill 124. Free collective bargaining is key to all three pillars – stripping workers' Constitutional rights weakens all three and results in the loss of essential public service workers to other fields.
4. **Protect public services and resources.** Public services are the great equalizer, but most of our services today are in desperate need of significant investment to address crisis-level understaffing and/or crumbling infrastructure. It's time for the government to recommit to the publicly owned LCBO, and the revenue it brings in to help pay for public services like health care, education and more.
5. **Expand public services.** After decades of costly and ineffective privatization, it's time to stop selling off and outsourcing public services and start instead to find new ways to marshal the scale and efficiency of public services in sectors like child care and long-term care.

While we are pleased to participate in this discussion, we have two fundamental concerns when it comes to the Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee:

1. The committee does not include a single front-line worker, or union representing front-line workers.

From the beginning of the pandemic, OPSEU/SEFPO has been urging government to bring workers to the table for post-pandemic planning. Our members, and all front-line workers, have made incredible contributions throughout this crisis. In workplaces and jobs across the province, we've seen first-hand where the system is weakest and we've learned on the fly and under pressure how to address those weaknesses.

Workers bring to the table experience, knowledge, and dedication. Leaving them without a real voice in this effort – and a substantial role in shaping the discussion on recovery – would be a tragic mistake.

2. Recovery is not enough.

We must think bigger. Bolder.

We must think about the future the way soldiers did when they returned home to Canada from the front lines of the Second World War.

They didn't sacrifice so much just to recover the Canada that was before the war – a country ravaged by the Depression and a massive gulf between the rich and poor. They understood, with renewed vigour, the importance of equality, democracy and solidarity, and they saw that a strong social safety net would help make everybody's lives better.

So they demanded better for post-war Canada, and they got it: bold, confident and massive investment in public services, public infrastructure, and public capacity. They understood that a government deficit is actually an investment in everybody's future, and they began to invest. In Medicare. In public education for all. In the Canada Pension Plan. In the Old Age Supplement.

With strong public services and a bold, confident vision of the future, those who served on the front lines of the Second World War came back to the country and worked together to usher in one of the most prosperous and productive periods in Canadian history.

Now, OPSEU/SEFPO members serving on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis are ready to roll up their sleeves and work hard together – with leaders in government and business – to usher in a brand new period of prosperity and productivity.

It won't be easy. But OPSEU/SEFPO members – and all front-line workers – have learned over the past year-and-a-half just how strong they are under pressure, and just how deep their courage, dedication, and resolve runs.

Give workers a real voice in post-pandemic planning, and we're confident that Ontario won't just recover from COVID-19, it will be revitalized and rejuvenated. Let's move towards tomorrow together.



Warren (Smokey) Thomas,
President, OPSEU/SEFPO

Healthy communities, healthy workforce

To increase capacity, and attract new employers and workers, focus on communities

A healthy and productive workforce depends on healthy and prosperous communities. Healthy and prosperous communities depend on strong public services.

While OPSEU/SEFPO has serious concerns about the mandate and composition of the Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee, we see value in the “three pillars” the government tasked it with addressing:

- Economic recovery
- Strengthening Ontario’s competitive position
- Supporting workers

The government’s openness to supporting these pillars by improving Ontario’s labour laws and training programs is encouraging, and OPSEU/SEFPO members have concrete ideas to contribute.

But before we go into details about those ideas, it must be acknowledged that just changing labour laws and training programs alone will not achieve the government’s goal “to make Ontario the top jurisdiction with a world-class workforce and talent supply.”

Instead, a more holistic and long-term plan is needed. A plan based on OPSEU/SEFPO’s five core principles for helping Ontario emerge from the pandemic stronger, safer, and more prosperous than ever:

1. Invest to expand capacity in hospitals and long-term care
2. Invite workers to the table
3. Respect workers
4. Protect public services and resources
5. Expand public services

For example, consider the thousands of people working as PSWs in health, home, and long-term care.

We’ve come to see during the pandemic just how vital their work is – sometimes a matter of life and death.

And yet as a workforce, PSWs have long been treated as disposable. They are rarely afforded the working conditions and manageable workloads they need to provide safe and dignified care. They are rarely afforded the wages and job security they need to focus 100 per cent of their energy on their work. It’s practically impossible to do your best when you’re chronically worried about putting food on your family’s table or paying next month’s rent.

With thousands of our members working as PSWs, OPSEU/SEFPO is keenly aware of the labour laws and training programs that need to change to address the severe worker shortages that have become so dangerous, even deadly, during the pandemic.

The government has made promising initial steps, offering and then extending pandemic pay to PSWs, while also taking OPSEU/SEFPO's advice to task our community colleges with offering tuition-free accelerated PSW training.

This is an investment in PSWs and the people they care for. It's also an investment that will help the government achieve its goal to "ensure that Ontario remains the best place in North America to recruit, retain, and reward workers ... in an increasingly remote, global and technologically advanced economy."

PSWs may not be part of the workforce that is remote, global, or technologically advanced, but they provide vital support to those in that workforce.

Ontario will be more attractive to remote, global, or technologically advanced workers if they are confident they will find good communities in which to build meaningful careers, raise their families and, one day, retire with dignity.

Workers will want to be in Ontario if they know it's the kind of place where they can count on high-quality public services. Where they know that if they or a family member ever need a PSW, the PSW will be well enough trained and supported that they bring energy and passion to the care they provide.

If workers want to be in Ontario, employers will want to be in Ontario, too.

For top companies and organizations that strive for real, long-term success, a satisfied and engaged workforce is much more valuable than used-car sales tricks like tax breaks, lax labour laws, and deregulation.

If we strive to be the best place in the world to live and work – and we should – we must stop racing for the bottom. It's time to lead towards the top.

If we make our communities the best places in the world to be a PSW - or any other front-line public sector worker – we'll be well on the way to making our communities the best places in the world for all workers.

Strong services and regulations, strong communities

To increase capacity, and attract new employers and workers, focus on communities

There are five principles behind OPSEU/SEFPO's plan to help Ontario emerge as strong, safe and healthy as possible from the pandemic.

Each of the five contributes in a variety of ways to the three pillars upon which the government wants to base our workplace recovery: economic recovery, strengthening Ontario's competitive position, and supporting workers.

Invest to expand capacity in hospitals and long-term care

For years, OPSEU/SEFPO has been raising red flags about the impact of devastating cuts to hospital beds, services and staff. Hospitals across Ontario have been chronically overcapacity where something as common as the seasonal flu can send them into crisis mode when patient volumes spike.

Before COVID-19, our hospitals were already in crisis. While the pandemic didn't create the hospital capacity crisis, it did bring our health care system to the brink of collapse, pushing hospitals well beyond 100 per cent.

Even after all the vital and incredibly relevant lessons learned during the SARS crisis, the refusal of government to properly invest in health care meant that many of the protocols and protections mandated after SARS – including the maintenance of a large stockpile of masks and other PPE², and an understanding of the dangers of cross-site contamination – were dropped and forgotten in the name of deficit-cutting and spending restraint.

We shouldn't make that same mistake again.

We must emerge from the COVID pandemic with a clear-eyed acknowledgment that our health care system is too emaciated after decades of austerity to handle our everyday needs, let alone another pandemic or crisis.

In long-term care, we've seen a similar decades-long downslide. In this sector, previous governments made the terrible mistake of turning to privatization to cut investment and accountability. More than half of the province's homes are now corporate profit centres where the pressure is always high to cut costs and reduce staff.

The result: four times as many COVID-related deaths in private homes than in public or non-profit homes.

Health and long-term care need immediate investment. Now.

But according to the province's Financial Accountability Officer (FAO), the government's current health funding plans aren't nearly enough, and will leave the sector with a budget shortfall of more than \$60 billion by 2030.³

The current picture is no better when looking at the number of hospital and long-term care beds the government plans to fund to deal with shortages and long wait times.⁴

In comparison to other countries, Ontario already has one of the lowest rates of hospital beds per 1,000 people in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).⁵ And while the government is planning to increase the number of hospital beds by nine per cent over the next 10 years, Ontario's population is expected to grow by up to 23 per cent.⁶

This is clearly not good enough – can we really attract and retain the world's best and brightest if moving to Ontario means waiting months and months for surgery or years and years for a home in a long-term care facility?

2. [*Millions of masks stockpiled in Canada's Ontario expired before coronavirus hit*](#), Reuters, March 9, 2020

3. [*FAO projects health sector spending shortfall of \\$61.9 billion over nine years*](#), Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario, May 10, 2021

4. [*Published plans and annual reports 2020-2021*](#): Ontario Ministry of Health

5. [*Ontario Health Sector: A Preliminary Review of the Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Hospital Capacity*](#), Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario, April 28, 2020

6. [*Ontario population projections*](#), Government of Ontario

We must commit to immediately finding and investing billions more in health and long-term care. A good place to start: the \$10 billion the FAO says the province is still sitting on for pandemic relief.⁷

That money is doing no good sitting idle on the books – let’s put it to work. Now.

Invite workers to the table

Some Ontarians suffered much more than others, but every person in the province was in some way touched by COVID-19.

We all had to make changes and sacrifices. We all had challenges to overcome and lessons to learn. And we all have thoughts, ideas, and energy to help Ontario bring back better.

Government will be squandering an incredibly valuable resource if it doesn’t give workers and their unions a real voice at the table when it comes to planning and building for the future.

Bodies like the Workplace Recovery Advisory Committee will never live up to their potential if they’re stacked only with people from academia and the private sector. Without first-hand experience on the front-lines, how can a group of professors, lawyers, and corporate managers truly understand what the workforce needs.

Workers bring front-line experience, along with a passion and dedication for providing the kind of care and services Ontarians really need. Space must be made for workers and their unions on the Workplace Recovery Advisory Committee, along with all other committees that government strikes for post-pandemic planning.

Respect workers

The government says it wants to support workers, but it’s impossible to do so while at the same time stripping them of their Constitutional right to free and fair collective bargaining.

The best and easiest way to increase support for workers is to repeal Bill 124 and allow all workers who’ve already bargained contracts under its caps to reopen bargaining on wages and other monetary issues.

Many similar wage cap bills have been overturned by the courts over the past decade, including here in Ontario, where education workers ultimately received more than a hundred million dollars in compensation.⁸ Why risk the same thing now?

Once Bill 124, and its wage increase caps, is repealed, the government can then turn its attention to making it easier for all Ontario workers to join and participate in a union.

⁷. [2021 Expenditure Monitor 2020-21: Q4](#), Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario

⁸. [Ontario owes teachers more than \\$100M for interfering with their bargaining rights](#), CBC News, June 15, 2017

This could include returning to the “card check” system of union organizing, which allows employers far fewer opportunities to pressure, intimidate, and harass workers interested in joining with their co-workers.

It must also include a hard and realistic look at the legal and regulatory games being played on people working for temp agencies or technology platforms such as Uber and Skip the Dishes.

While claiming to offer flexibility and freedom to workers, these agencies and platforms are actually dooming a growing number of workers to uncertainty, anxiety, and very little freedom and flexibility to get ahead.

It should be simple, and it is: if you do regular work that provides profit to a tech multinational or a local temp agency, you should have the right to be treated as an employee and receive all the protections and benefits that go along with being an employee, not the least of which is the ability to join a union.

Lastly, government can go a long way towards supporting workers by revisiting short-sited changes it has made to the Employment Standards Act (ESA).

COVID underlined the importance of paid sick days to hundreds of thousands of Ontario workers, and it’s time to return permanent paid sick days to the ESA. As

Ontario’s COVID-19 Science Table found, the introduction of paid sick days in the United States led to a massive 50 per cent reduction in new cases per day.⁹ For the end of this pandemic, and anticipating the next, it’s time for government to acknowledge the research and provide guaranteed paid sick days to all Ontario workers.

Ontario would also be stronger if the ESA guaranteed minimum wages that are closer to the actual living wages needed in our communities, and went back to protecting part-time workers from being paid less than full-time workers doing the same work.

Protect public services and resources

As covered earlier, Ontario’s health and long-term care sectors have been left vulnerable and devastated by 40 years of cuts, freezes, and austerity. It’s no different in education, social services, or any of the many other public services OPSEU/SEFPO members provide.

A variety of sources – from RBC¹⁰ to the province’s Financial Accountability Office¹¹ – show that Ontario currently invests less per person in public services than any other province. The result: Ontario performs worse than all the other provinces on a number of measures, including hospital

9. [*Benefits of Paid Sick Leave During the COVID-19 Pandemic*](#), COVID-19 Advisory Science Table for Ontario, May 4, 2021

10. [*Canadian Federal and Provincial Fiscal Tables*](#), RBC, May 31, 2021

11. [*Comparing Ontario’s Fiscal Position with Other Provinces*](#), Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario, February 14, 2019

mortality¹², social and affordable housing wait times¹³, and per-student investment in post-secondary education.¹⁴

Four decades of austerity and deficit obsession have left our public services a shell of what they could be, and it hasn't delivered on its promise of eliminating debts and deficits.

That's because fighting deficits doesn't reduce deficits – only growth and investment do.

Hand-in-hand with austerity over the past 40 years, tax rates in Canada and Ontario have been dropped significantly for corporations and wealthy individuals. It's time to start asking the rich to invest their fair share in the public services that benefit us all.

Imagine the possibilities. High quality health and long-term care when you need it. Public schools that are safe and appropriately staffed to ensure all learners get the attention they need. Community colleges that are both affordable and responsive to the needs of the economy and the workforce. Decent housing for all.

The government must also abandon its little-disguised desire to give convenience stores the right to sell beer and wine.

Alcohol policy is well studied and the studies are clear: alcohol privatization leads to more consumption, and more

consumption leads to increased costs in health care, social services, and justice.¹⁵

At the same time, there's also growing evidence that private alcohol sales siphon off government alcohol revenue. Last year alone, the publicly owned LCBO returned more than \$2 billion in profits to our hospitals, schools, and highways.

By increasing private alcohol sales, the government is shooting itself in the foot twice: increasing its costs while reducing its revenue. It's terrible policy and it must end. It's time for government to recommit to the LCBO as the main seller of alcohol across Ontario and, in municipalities that choose it, as the main seller of cannabis too.

Expand public services

If we want a bright future, we need to be bold and visionary.

Instead of focusing on deficit reduction – which inevitably leads to austerity and privatization – now is the time to forge a new path. Instead of what can we cut, let's start asking what can we build together?

For a start, we can build stronger communities by bringing back into the public sphere the infrastructure and services that have been privatized over the past four decades: driver testing, highway maintenance, medical lab testing, Hydro

12. [*Ontario Hospitals – Leaders in Efficiency*](#), Ontario Hospital Association, December 2019

13. [*Waitlist status including length of time, by tenure including social and affordable housing*](#), Statistics Canada, November 22, 2019

14. [*Provincial Government Funding per FTE Student \(\\$ 2017\)*](#), Canadian Association of University Teachers

15. [*The association between alcohol access and alcohol-attributable emergency department visits in Ontario, Canada*](#), Myran, Chen, Giesbrecht, Rees, March 2019

One, Developmental and autism services, Highway 407.

These had all been public, before they were privatized. There's no reason why they can't be made public again. We'd all benefit because the evidence is clear: privatization ends up costing more while delivering less.¹⁶ It's not a good deal for anybody except the wealthy.

We needn't stop at simply repatriating services and infrastructure that have been sold off in the past. We must invest in public, universal, child care, Pharmacare, and a long-term care system that is completely public.

The benefits of investing in ourselves by investing in our services are vast.

For example, a study of Quebec's public childcare program found that the program helped so many people – particularly women – to return to the workforce that the increased income tax more than paid for the program's cost.¹⁷

Meanwhile, research on Pharmacare programs shows that billions would be saved in medicine costs, not to mention the significant hospital savings that would be realized if people can afford the medicine they need to prevent a chronic condition from becoming acute.¹⁸

Conclusion

Ontario has an important choice to make.

Either we return to the pre-pandemic days of austerity and cuts and a workforce that is stretched to the breaking point by high workloads, low pay, and an alarming drop in stability and job security, or, we pull together as a province – with leaders and workers from government, academia, the public and private sectors – to build an Ontario that is healthier, safer, and more prosperous for all.

Building a better Ontario in the wake of the pandemic won't be easy – but worthwhile things rarely are.

Speaking on behalf of OPSEU/SEFPO's 180,000 members we are ready to get down to the hard work of building towards tomorrow together.

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17. [*Impact of Quebec's Universal Low-Fee Childcare Program on Female Labour Participation, Domestic Income, and Government Budgets*](#), Fortin, Godbout, St-Cerny

18. [*A Prescription for Canada: Achieving Pharmacare for All*](#), Government of Canada, June 2019

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