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# Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms and Costs in Ontario:

## A Provincial Summary Report

# **Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms and Costs in Ontario: A Provincial Summary Report**

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## **Overview**

The overall objective of this project is to encourage greater uptake of evidence-informed prevention and policy initiatives that reduce alcohol-related harms in Canada. This project documents current alcohol policy initiatives across Canada and draws comparisons across the provinces. The project serves to highlight policy strengths across each of these jurisdictions, provide recommendations on how to improve weaker policy areas and disseminate this up-to-date information to major stakeholders and policymakers in each jurisdiction.

In March of 2013, the main report entitled: *Strategies to Reduce Alcohol-Related Harms and Costs in Canada: A Comparison of Provincial Policies* (Giesbrecht et al., 2013), which documents the findings of this project, was released at an event hosted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. The full report is available at:

[http://www.camh.ca/en/research/news\\_and\\_publications/reports\\_and\\_books/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.camh.ca/en/research/news_and_publications/reports_and_books/Pages/default.aspx)

This provincial summary report serves to provide more detailed results and tailored recommendations for the province of Ontario. This project seeks to disseminate this information to policy-makers, decision-makers and knowledge users in order to stimulate policy change. The project also hopes to inform provincial liquor boards and alcohol regulators on the additional roles that they can play in helping to reduce alcohol related harms and costs.

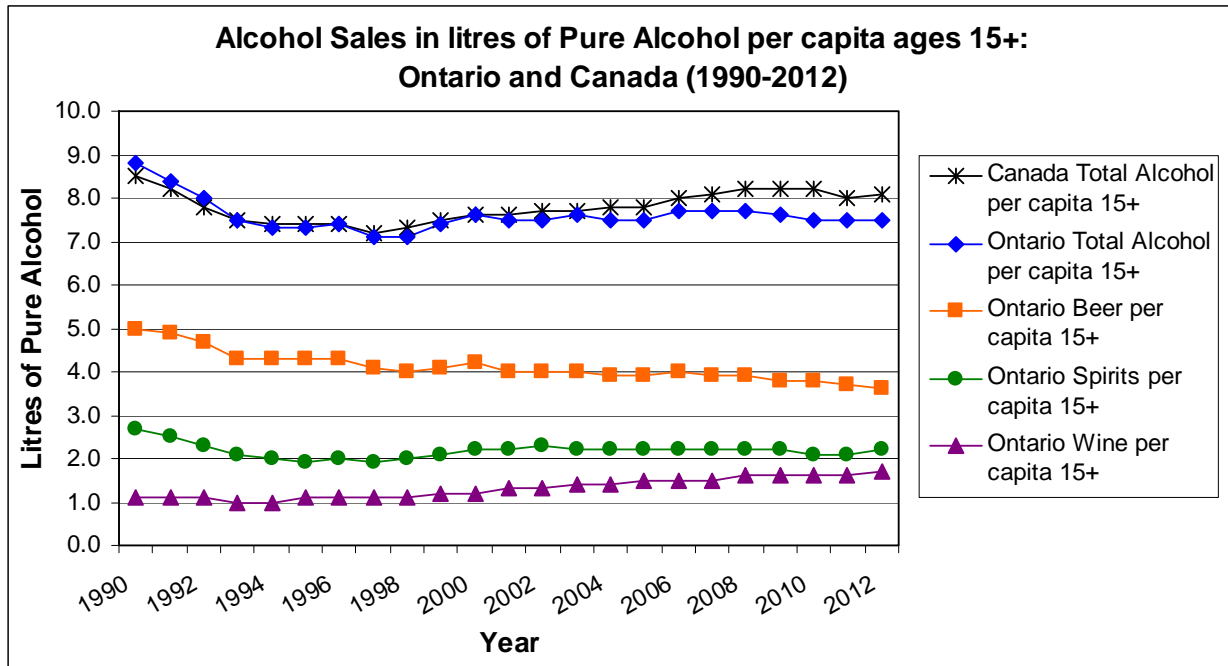
## **Methods**

This project builds on the model implemented by MADD Canada and is based on well established and rigorous systematic reviews on the effectiveness of alcohol prevention measures as well as other studies which take a comparative approach to assessing alcohol policies (Anderson et al., 2009; Babor et al., 2010; Brand et al., 2007; Karlsson & Österberg, 2011). The policy dimensions central to this project were selected based on a review of the literature and best practices and overlap with those identified by the World Health Organization (2010) and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse in the National Alcohol Strategy (2007). The scoring rubric consists of 10 weighted policy dimensions which are each comprised of several scaled indicator measures and was peer reviewed by three international alcohol policy experts. Data for this project was collected systematically from official sources and verified by representatives from the relevant ministries. Finally, following a pilot test of the scoring system, the final scores were tabulated and weighted to produce the final provincial rankings.

## **The Current Status of Alcohol Use in Ontario**

While the total per capita alcohol consumption for Canada increased by 12.5% between 1997 and 2012 the per capita alcohol consumption for Ontario has been relatively stable in recent years, showing an increase of 5.6% over the same 15 year period, see Figure 1 (Statistics Canada, 2012). Ontario survey data indicate that between 75- 81% of Ontarians have consumed alcohol in the last 12 months (Ialomiteanu et al., 2012; Health Canada, 2012). Almost 5% of Ontario drinkers consume alcohol daily and approximately 22% of Ontario drinkers drink above the Canadian low-risk drinking guidelines (Ialomiteanu et al., 2012).

**Figure 1**



**Recent Developments in Alcohol Policy in Ontario (since Nov, 2012)**

The following is a summary of some of the developments in alcohol policy and practices that have taken place or that have been announced in Ontario since the end of the data collection period of the main report in Fall 2012.

Proposals to privatize Ontario alcohol retail outlets have been on the political agenda in Ontario. In December 2012, Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak indicated that he would be in favour of increased privatization of alcohol sales in Ontario. In contrast, in December 2012, upon government direction to test alternative store formats, the Minister of Finance announced a pilot project to sell liquor and wine in 10 LCBO Express stores. These new stores will be housed within large grocery outlets in Ontario in order to increase consumer access to alcohol. The stores will be smaller than regular LCBO outlets but will operate during regular LCBO business hours and will be run by LCBO staff. From a business perspective, the results of the pilot project were expected to be positive, and then be expanded to other areas in Ontario.

In 2012/13 the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) introduced new components to their Check 25 challenge and refusal program in all 630 governments owned and operated locations across Ontario. The program now requires that customers who are 25 years or younger, or appear to be, have their valid ID ready to be checked when approaching the cash area. The program also includes new visual and auditory elements to remind customers of the new policy. Evaluation results of the enhanced Check 25 program, based on over 520 integrity checks, indicate a provincial compliance rate of nearly 94% (LCBO, 2013).

Furthermore, the minimum prices in off-premise alcohol retail outlets in Ontario are indexed to the Canadian Price Index (CPI). As a result, the minimum prices in Ontario retail outlets are revised each year to reflect inflation. On March 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 the newly adjusted minimum prices

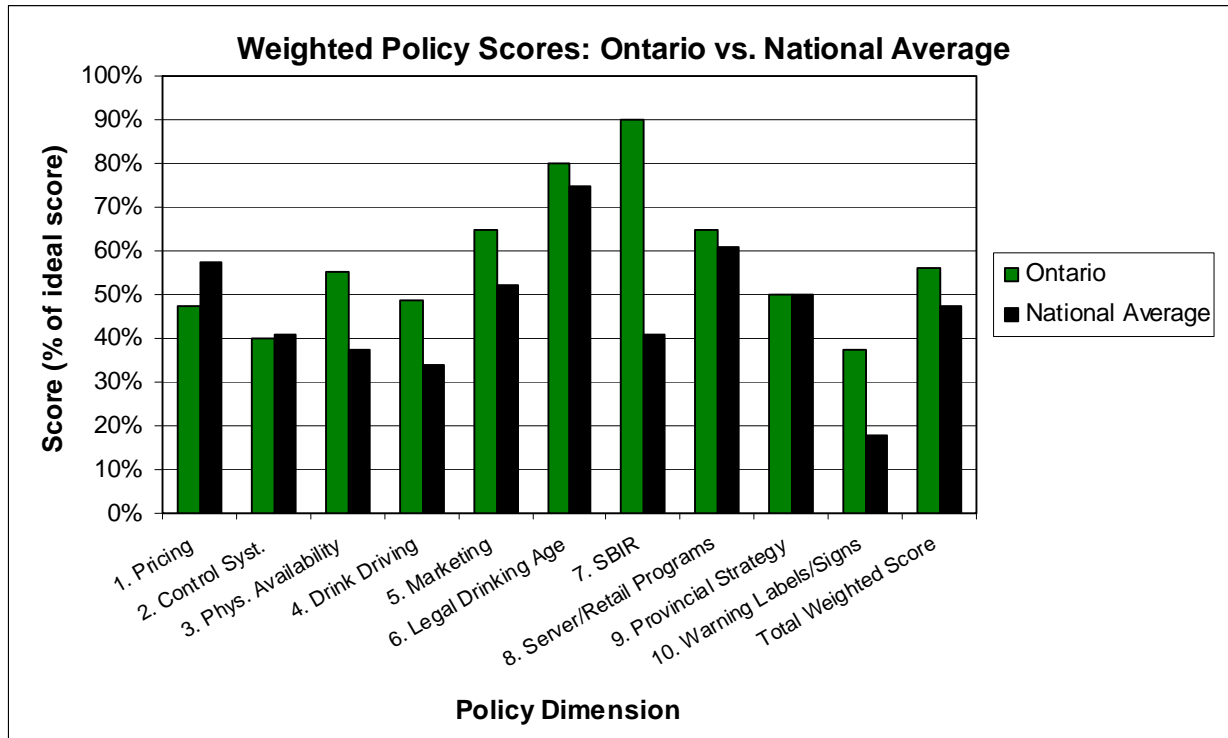
came into effect in Ontario alcohol retail outlets. This is the third year this regulation has been in operation and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario reports that the price changes were implemented without issue.

The Ontario server training program Smart Serve has recently committed to providing scenario based training using simulated world technology in the next iteration of the Smart Serve program. As well, Smart Serve has increased efforts to maintain the integrity of the online server and management training program. Specifically, Smart Serve has begun testing and is moving towards full time online proctoring for online exams, requiring program participants to show government issued identification using webcam technology before writing the Smart Serve exam. Finally as a result of a process evaluation conducted to identify demographic characteristics of program participants, Smart Serve training will also be made more accessible by expanding the languages in which training is offered from English, French, Mandarin and Cantonese to also include Korean and Spanish.

### Ontario Specific Results

Ontario ranked first overall and demonstrated areas of strength around identifying screening brief intervention and referral as a priority area, having legislation pertaining to the minimum legal drinking and the marketing and advertising of alcohol as well as enforcement of these policies. Figure 2 shows a comparison between Ontario’s score on each of the policy dimensions compared to the national average score (across the 10 provinces) for each policy dimension.

**Figure 2**



The following is a detailed review of the results for Ontario and includes Ontario specific policy recommendations. It should be noted that the policy dimensions listed below are listed in order of their level of effectiveness and population reach i.e. the policies are listed in the order in which they are likely to have the most impact on reducing alcohol related harms and costs.

## **1. Pricing**

**Promising Practices:** Ontario has minimum prices for all beverage categories sold in both on-premise licensed establishments and off-premise alcohol retail outlets. As well, the minimum prices for products sold from off-premise outlets are indexed to inflation annually. Ontario is the only province to index off-premise minimum prices across all beverage categories. Furthermore, Ontario's pricing structure takes into consideration the alcohol content of beverages by adjusting some prices by bands of alcohol strength. Alcohol content is taken into account for many products when setting minimum prices and for some when setting mark-ups. These practices help ensure that the price per standard serving remains constant across the product spectrum.

**Areas for improvement:** Despite having minimum prices for all beverages in Ontario, there exists several exceptions to minimum pricing regulations such as the sale of delisted products below the minimum price, discounted gift certificates valid for the purchase of alcohol as well as free samples distributed by alcohol manufacturers. The average minimum price per standard drink for products of typical strength and volume in Ontario was \$1.19 for alcohol sold from off-premise retail outlets and \$2.25 for alcoholic beverages sold from on-premise establishments. These average regulated minimum prices fall below the minimum price points that have been recommended by the project team i.e. \$1.50 per standard drink in off-premise outlets and \$3.00 per standard drink in on-premise establishments. Despite having indexed minimum prices to inflation, the average price of alcohol, for all major beverage types in Ontario, has lagged behind the CPI since 2006.

**Recommendations:** Ontario's alcohol pricing policies can be strengthened by implementing a few key pricing policies and closing the loopholes that are contrary to a precautionary pricing system. Ontario could benefit from adjusting their prices to keep pace with inflation. This would prevent alcohol prices from becoming cheaper relative to other goods over time. Restrictions on discounted alcohol sold below minimum price, such as delisted products and free samples, would help prevent inexpensive sources of alcohol from entering the market.

## **2. Alcohol Control System**

**Promising Practices:** Ontario has a mixed system of private and publicly owned off-premise retail outlets. Alcohol is primarily sold through three main off-premise retail channels in Ontario. Stores controlled by the LCBO sell spirits, imported and domestic wines, and beer products; the Beer Store network sells domestic and imported beers; and Ontario winery stores sell Ontario wines. The government run retail outlets in Ontario disseminate social responsibility messages across several mediums including: posters, online content and mobile apps, point of sale screens, and an information hotline. As well, the LCBO supports the dissemination of the Canadian low-risk drinking guidelines by making information pamphlets available at their retail locations.

**Areas for Improvement:** Using only the number of alcohol access points as a measure, approximately 26% of off-premise retail outlets in Ontario are publicly owned. Alcohol is also sold through various channels in Ontario such as liquor delivery services, ferment on premise outlets and online sales. Ferment at home kits are also sold in Ontario. There continues to be extensive manufacturer sponsored product promotion that makes use of the provincial liquor board's logos and branding in Ontario. For example, in 2010/11 just over 34.5 million dollars were spent on industry sponsored product and service advertising.

**Recommendations:** It is important for Ontario to maintain a government run retail system. Government run monopolies play a key role in regulating access to alcohol by maintaining effective alcohol control strategies such as legal drinking age and enforcement, the regulation of alcohol pricing, hours and days of sale and upholding a socially responsible mandate (Babor et al., 2010). There is evidence of gradual privatization over recent years in Ontario. Ontario is urged to place a moratorium on the expansion of private outlets including access to alcohol through other channels such as online sales, delivery services and other forms of privatization such as grocery and convenience store sales. Results from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) Monitor Survey indicate that over 70% of Ontarians are opposed to corner store sales and over 60% are opposed to closing LCBO outlets and allowing private run stores in their place (Giesbrecht & Ialomiteanu, 2013). Ontario retail outlets are also urged to curb the amount of marketing and advertising by implementing a cap on the quantity of advertisements, including sponsored advertisements that make use of the provincial liquor board's logo and branding, and move towards reduced advertising (CPHA, 2011; Giesbrecht et al., 2011).

### **3. Physical Availability**

**Promising Practices:** Regulations in Ontario provide opportunity for citizen input with regards to the placement of certain alcohol outlets, including licensed establishments and agency stores. Ontario has the second lowest population outlet density for off-premise retail outlets and the lowest population outlet density for on-premise licensed establishments. The hours of availability are also regulated in Ontario. On-premise licensed establishments cannot sell alcohol before 11:00 am or after 2:00 am the next day.

**Areas for Improvement:** Current regulations allow off-premise retail outlets to sell alcohol from as early as 7:00 am and as late as midnight from Agency stores. LCBO outlets and Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) authorized winery, brewery and distillery retail stores have somewhat shorter hours of operation with regulations stipulating these outlets must operate within the hours of 9:00 am to 11:00 pm Monday to Friday and 11:00 am to 6:00 pm on Sundays. Across all alcohol sales channels, alcohol is available for the greater part of the day.

**Recommendations:** The LCBO is encouraged to involve citizens in decisions made regarding the opening of any liquor retail outlets and to restrict the density of outlets based on population. Results from the Ontario Adult Survey indicate that just over 75% of Ontarians live within a ten minute commute from an alcohol retail outlet (Giesbrecht & Ialomiteanu, 2013). Currently, alcohol is available for the greater part of the day with Agency stores being permitted to operate for 17 hours a day. Ontario is encouraged to reduce the availability of alcohol by, at minimum,

limiting the hours of operation of Agency stores to match those of other off-premise alcohol retail outlets.

#### **4. Drinking and Driving**

Note: The following is based on information provided by MADD Canada in their most recent review of drinking and driving legislation in Canada. For a comprehensive review and comparative analysis of drinking and driving countermeasures in each province please refer to the MADD Canada 2012 Provincial and Territorial Legislative Review (Solomon, Cardy, Noble et al., 2012).

**Promising Practices:** Ontario is one of the few provinces to implement additional 0.00% BAC limits that extend beyond the two year graduated licensing program (GLP). Ontario has also enacted legislation imposing mandatory 7-day vehicle impoundments on: drivers with BACs above 0.08%; drivers who refuse a required breath, blood or other test; and drivers found in contravention of an interlock order or various provincial licence suspensions. License suspensions and impoundments are also noted on drivers' records, and are associated with a \$150 reinstatement fee and escalating sanctions for drivers with repeat records. Ontario also implements mandatory education and treatment programs for repeat offenders and is the only province to implement mandatory lifetime interlock programs for third time federal impaired driving offenders.

**Areas for Improvement:** Ontario's graduated licensing program is currently a maximum of two years and does not include BAC restrictions for supervising passengers. Overall police powers are lacking. Currently police are not authorized to demand an approved screening device test from all new drivers who fall under the graduated licensing program and their supervisors. Furthermore, police do not have the authority to suspend the licence of drivers who are reasonably believed to be impaired by alcohol.

**Recommendations:** The graduated licensing program in Ontario could be strengthened by lengthening each stage of the program, requiring that supervising drivers have a 0.00% BAC and broadening police powers to enforce the various components of the program. The short-term administrative licence suspension program could be strengthened by lengthening suspension times, particularly for repeat offenders, and by impounding vehicles for the duration of the administrative licence suspension. Finally participation in vehicle interlock programs should be a mandatory condition of relicensing for all federal impaired driving offenders.

#### **5. Marketing and Advertising**

**Promising Practices:** Ontario's provincial marketing regulations extend beyond those required by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and include restrictions on the placement of advertisements such as forbidding the placement of advertisements in areas which are frequented mostly by persons under the legal drinking age as well as restrictions on advertising prices in licensed establishments. The AGCO is responsible for the enforcement of the provincial advertising regulations and has a clear and formalised process for lodging complaints against advertisements that do not meet the required standards.



**Areas for Improvement:** There are currently no restrictions on the quantity of alcohol advertising in Ontario and regulations do not restrict the advertisement of price by off-premise outlets. As a result there is an abundance of advertising that makes use of the provincial liquor board's logo and branding with these advertisements often depicting sales and other marketing incentives such as Air Miles promotions.

**Recommendations:** It is recommended that Ontario forbid the advertisement of price or other sales incentives by all alcohol retailers. The provincial liquor board is encouraged to reduce the volume of advertisements it distributes (see CPHA, 2011; Giesbrecht et al., 2011) and the province is urged to tighten restrictions on sponsorship specifically, banning corporate or brand identified scholarships or bursaries and other forms of sponsorship that target youth and young adults.

## **6. Legal Drinking Age**

**Promising Practices:** The minimum legal drinking age in Ontario, which is 19 years of age, is supported by legislation prohibiting the sale of alcohol to a minor and the purchase of alcohol by a minor. Enforcement of the minimum legal drinking age in Ontario is strong. The AGCO has a liquor inspection program to enforce the legal drinking age and also provide training resources to and collaborates with law enforcement to enforce the legal drinking age in on-premise establishments. The government run liquor retail outlets implement the Check-25 program which has recently been strengthened by including more stringent criteria for verifying the age of customers.

**Areas for Improvement:** The minimum legal drinking age in Ontario is 19 years of age. Regulations pertaining to social hosting laws in Ontario permit parents to serve alcohol to their underage children within a private residence.

**Recommendations:** The legal drinking age is 19 in Ontario. There is some evidence from Canada for a higher minimum legal drinking age (Whitehead et al., 1975; 1977) however the more robust evidence comes from the United States (Wagenaar & Toomey, 2002). Research findings from the United States support implementing a higher drinking age, such as 21 years of age, to help reduce drinking and driving incidents and delay the onset of drinking (Babor et al., 2010).

## **7. Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral (SBIR)**

**Promising Practices:** Screening, brief intervention and referral is included in Ontario's provincial Mental Health and Addictions plan entitled: *Open Minds, Healthy Minds: Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy*. The strategy identifies SBIR practices as a key activity in enhancing the capacity of first responders to identify early signs of addiction and getting people the proper care and support. Furthermore, Ontario also has a health counselling fee for service code that can be used for SBIR activities conducted by physicians with their patients.

**Areas for improvement:** Ontario does not have an SBIR fee for service code that is specifically for alcohol use screening, brief intervention and referral activities.

**Recommendations:** In order to support consistency in SBIR protocol across physicians, Ontario is encouraged to implement a fee for service code that is specific to alcohol use SBIR activities. Ontario is also encouraged to make use of the SBIR web-based resource released in November 2012 by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) and the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC).

## **8. Server Training and Challenge and Refusal**

**Promising Practices:** Ontario has implemented a server training program, Smart Serve, which is mandatory province wide, including at licensed one-time special events. The Smart Serve program includes a comprehensive set of challenge criteria including challenging those who look underage or who appear to be intoxicated. Smart Serve is offered online as well as in person and the program is delivered by certified trainers who hold adult education teaching qualifications. The Smart Serve program goes to great lengths to maintain the integrity of the online program by implementing security measures such as random audits of program participants and is in the process of testing full-time proctoring of exams.

Similarly, Ontario also has a mandatory training program for LCBO and LCBO Agency retail outlet staff. The program, *Challenge & Refusal: It's not personal. It's the law*, is evaluated through an integrity shopping program which measures employee behaviour in checking for proper identification and is based on a comprehensive set of challenge criteria and updated on a regular basis. The challenge and refusal program is implemented in government owned and run retail outlets and tracks the number and types of challenge and refusals. Ontario received the highest possible score for their challenge and refusal program.

**Areas for improvement:** The Smart Serve program has not yet been evaluated for effectiveness in reducing over-service and service to minors and does not require recertification.

**Recommendations:** The Smart Serve program is encouraged to incorporate scenario based activities into its training program and to require periodic retraining, e.g. every 5 years, to help reinforce training and also give trainees the opportunity to learn of any changes in alcohol policy and regulation. Several of the Canadian provinces have server training programs with their own areas of strength. It is recommended that there be increased collaboration between provinces with regards to these initiatives and that these programs undergo evaluation, e.g. with before and after measures and a comparison site, in order to better understand their impact on rates of over-service and underage drinking. Furthermore, challenge and refusals are not consistently tracked amongst private retailers or on-premise licensed establishments. It is recommended that private retail outlets and on-premise establishments track challenge and refusals and make this information available for monitoring and evaluation activities.

## **9. Provincial Alcohol Strategy**

**Promising Practices:** Alcohol is included in Ontario's Mental Health and Addiction Strategy entitled: *Open Minds, Healthy Minds; Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy (2011)* which recognizes the importance of: leadership, awareness and commitment; a health services response; mobilizing community action; and monitoring, surveillance and evaluation activities.

**Areas for Improvement:** Ontario does not have a provincial alcohol strategy. The existing mental health and addiction strategy, which includes alcohol, does not emphasize the importance of interventions or policies highlighted by the WHO (2010) that specifically target alcohol such as drinking and driving counter measures, limiting the availability of alcohol, curbing alcohol marketing, alcohol pricing policies and efforts to reduce the public health impact of illicit and informally produced alcohol.

**Recommendations:** An alcohol strategy is needed in Ontario. Recent reports that focus on alcohol as a public health issue such as the National Alcohol Strategy (2007), the WHO Global Strategy on Alcohol (2010), the Canadian Public Health Association position paper on alcohol Too High a Cost (2011), and the recent report by Cancer Care Ontario and Ontario Public Health, Taking Action to Prevent Chronic Disease (2012), could serve as resource tools in moving toward the development of an alcohol strategy for Ontario.

## **10. Warning Labels and Signs**

**Promising Practices:** Ontario is the only province to have implemented mandatory warning signs in on-premise and off-premise establishments. Sandy's Law requires that all bars and restaurants that are licensed to sell beer, wine and spirits, and all off-premise retail outlets, including ferment on premise outlets, prominently display an 8 x 10 inch sign indicating the risks of consuming alcohol while pregnant. The sign must state: "Warning: Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause birth defects and brain damage to your baby". The LCBO also displays other social responsibility messages and provides resource materials on how to prevent drinking and driving and messages indicating that individuals who are 25 years of age or younger, or appear to be, will not be served without proper government issued identification.

**Areas for Improvement:** Ontario does not have mandatory warning labels on beverage containers or packaging and does not have mandatory warning signs that include health messages beyond the risks of drinking during pregnancy. For example, warning signs that include health messages on drinking and driving, moderate alcohol consumption or the risks associated with alcohol use and chronic diseases are not mandatory in Ontario.

**Recommendations:** It is recommended that Ontario implement mandatory alcohol warning labels on alcohol beverage packaging. In addition to Sandy's Law, it is recommended that Ontario implement a variety of clear and direct health oriented warning messages at all points of sale, including both on-premise and off-premise outlets. These messages should include topics relevant to alcohol use such as drinking and driving, the risks of underage drinking, advice on low-risk drinking and information on alcohol as a modifiable risk factor for chronic diseases.

## **Recommendations for Ontario**

The following is a summary of the recommendations that have been outlined in detail in the above sections. The potential impact of these policies was assessed based on their scope (population reach) as well as the evidence of effectiveness. It should be noted that the policy recommendations are listed in the order in which they are most likely to have an impact on reducing alcohol related harms and costs. All of these policies are central to a comprehensive approach.

- Adjust all prices to keep pace with inflation.
- Do not permit exceptions to minimum prices such as delisted products or free samples.
- Stop further privatization of alcohol retail outlets.
- Reduce the amount of marketing including advertisements that make use of the LCBO logo and branding.
- Involve citizens in decisions regarding the placement of all retail outlets and licensed establishments.
- Limit the availability of alcohol by reducing the hours of operation, starting with agency stores.
- Implement the drinking and driving countermeasures recommended by MADD Canada.
- Prohibit the advertisement of prices or other sales incentives by all alcohol retailers.
- Tighten restrictions on sponsorship specifically, begin by banning alcohol sponsored scholarships and/or bursaries that target youth and young adults.
- Increase the minimum legal drinking age to 21 years of age.
- Implement a fee for service code for physicians that can be used specifically for screening, brief intervention and referral activities.
- Conduct an outcome evaluation of the server training program.
- Collaborate with administrators of server training programs in other provinces.
- Track challenge and refusals in on-premise establishments as well as private retail outlets and make this data readily available for monitoring and surveillance activities.
- Develop a provincial alcohol strategy that emphasises alcohol specific prevention and intervention initiatives.
- Implement mandatory warning labels on beverage containers with clear and direct health messages.
- Expand the current repertoire of mandatory warning signs in on-premise and off-premise outlets to include clear and direct messages on other health topics such as moderate consumption, underage drinking, drinking and driving and alcohol as modifiable risk factor for chronic disease.

Alcohol is no ordinary commodity (Babor et al., 2010; CPHA, 2011). It is imperative that Ontario continue to implement precautionary alcohol policies in order to reduce the harm and costs associated with alcohol use and to enhance the health and safety of Ontarians. Refining and implementing the recommendations listed above will require an evidence-based perspective, leadership, commitment to reducing alcohol-related harm and a spirit of collaboration among key stakeholders including various ministries and sectors of government, NGOs working on health issues, public health advocates and representatives from the private sector. As an immediate next step, a provincial alcohol strategy should be developed (King, 2013) with input from key

stakeholders committed to reducing the harm from alcohol. This strategy will serve to guide and promote further progress with regards to implementing these recommendations and effective alcohol policies in the province of Ontario.

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