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MCGUINTY GOVERNMENT COMMITTED TO APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED FROM SARS

Examining Final SARS Report To Strengthen Public Health System And Protect Frontline Workers

TORONTO – The McGuinty government will use Mr. Justice Archie Campbell’s final report on SARS to help further strengthen public health and better protect Ontarians and health care workers, Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smitherman and Labour Minister Steve Peters said today.

Mr. Justice Archie Campbell, who was commissioned to investigate the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Ontario four years ago, released his third and final report today.

“The contributions of countless health professionals who helped us cope with SARS will never be forgotten,” said Smitherman. “It is our job as government to learn from the experience and ensure we will be able to respond rapidly and effectively to any health emergencies. That’s why we have heeded Justice Campbell’s advice to date and we will do so again as we continue to better protect Ontarians and health care workers.”

“Ontario’s nurses can be assured that their safety is a priority for this government,” Smitherman added. “As we apply the lessons learned from SARS we must honour those lives lost in the duty of service to Ontarians.”

“We value the hard work and dedication of the approximately 500,000 health care workers who are on the front lines protecting us each and every day,” said Peters. “Our government is committed to ensuring the health and safety of everyone who works in this province and we will carefully assess the recommendations put forward on protecting health care workers.”

The third and final Campbell report explores the SARS crisis and future public health emergencies, and makes recommendations focusing, in particular, on health worker safety and strengthening the public health system.

Since the SARS crisis, the government has made significant progress in improving the health and safety of workers in the province, including the appointment of a new, permanent health and safety advisory committee under the Occupational Health and Safety Act to provide practical advice and recommendations on the unique occupational health and safety issues of health care workers to ensure they are protected. This committee, announced in September 2006, is made up of representatives of health care employers and unions.

Other improvements the government has made to public health, including those in direct response to Campbell’s interim reports, are:

- Passing legislation to make the Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) more independent
- Increasing funding to local public health units by more than 65 per cent, from \$266 million in 2003 to \$442 million in 2006.
- Establishing the Provincial Infectious Disease Advisory Committee to advise the CMOH on the prevention, surveillance and control of infectious diseases. A Ministry of Labour representative and an additional occupational health physician sit on the committee.
- Creating the Emergency Management Unit in response to SARS and the power outage of 2003, and improving communications between the ministry and health care stakeholders, including front line staff, at the time of a health crisis.
- Passing the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act in June 2006, which provided additional powers to support the government's ability to respond in a provincial emergency
- Making Ontario a leader in pandemic preparedness through emergency planning, stockpiling antivirals, supplies and equipment, and distributing more than 15,000 infection control kits to front line health care providers.
- Working to supply N95 masks to front line health care workers to increase protection during an infectious disease outbreak

Furthermore, through changes in the Health System Improvements Bill introduced in December, 2006, the government proposes to:

- Establish Ontario's first Health Protection and Promotion Agency modelled after the Centres for Disease Control to provide specialized scientific and technical advice and support to government, front-line health care workers and public health units
- Allow the government to ensure the more efficient and effective distribution of medical supplies during a public health emergency
- Provide the CMOH with public health emergency powers where there is an immediate risk to health
- Provide local medical officers of health with the power to monitor, investigate and respond to an outbreak of a communicable disease in a hospital or institution.

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