

# The Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders

## Leading the Way for Public Health Nursing

### Background Document

April 4, 2023

#### Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders

The Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders (OPHNL) includes the Public Health Chief Nursing Officers (PH CNO) from across the province, as well as nurses in director and manager positions, and nursing professional practice leaders. The mandate of OPHNL is to promote and protect the health of Ontarians through excellence in public health nursing leadership.

Requirements for Boards of Health to designate a Chief Nursing Officer are laid out in the Public Health Funding and Accountability Agreements between the Province and the Boards of Health. Within their local public health agencies, PH CNOs are the principal lead for nursing practice and professional issues, continuous quality improvement, and nursing workforce development. Furthermore, it is the role of PH CNOs to represent public health nursing at the community, provincial and national level. The PH CNO Network is a sub-group of OPHNL and includes the Chief Nursing Officers of all [34 local public health units](#) in Ontario. The PH CNOs are well positioned, within the broader public health structure, to provide consultation and a cross-province perspective on issues related to public health nursing and solutions to cross-sector health human resource challenges.

The public health workforce is comprised of a highly integrated interdisciplinary team of public health professionals. It is the role of OPHNL, while acknowledging the valuable work of our interdisciplinary partners, to speak specifically to the contribution that public health nurses make through mandated and locally innovative programs and services.

OPHNL fully supports the recent reports from the Chief Medical Officer of Health ([Being Ready](#)) and Association of Local Public Health Agencies ([Public Health Resilience in Ontario](#) and [Pre-Budget Submission: Public Health Programs and Services](#)). In addition, OPHNL recommends that the Provincial Government “increase and stabilize permanent funding for public health nurses to address service delivery backlogs and implement, innovative, convenient and easily accessible programs to promote health, prevent disease, and support the Province’s identified priorities immediately and over the long term.”

OPHNL has created an information sheet to outline this recommendation to the Province and to highlight public health nurse-delivered programs and interventions that have been successfully implemented by public health nurses in collaboration with local communities. It is OPHNL’s position that with increased and stabilized permanent funding for Public Health Nurse (PHN) positions, public health units can flexibly respond to community needs.

The current document provides a background summary focusing on the broad competencies, diverse work areas, skills and strengths of the public health nursing workforce.

#### Public Health in Ontario

Across Ontario, local public health units (PHUs) are mandated under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act* to provide programs and services that protect health, promote health, and prevent disease and injury. Under this mandate, PHUs provide upstream programs and services that are key to mitigating the long-term health, psychological, and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The existing public health infrastructure and role of the PHN can be leveraged to effectively meet immediate, short-term, and long-term community needs in the areas of health protection, promotion, and chronic disease prevention.

**Public Health Nurses**

PHNs are Registered Nurses with a baccalaureate degree in nursing that includes preparation in public health nursing as per the [Health Protection and Promotion Act](#). PHNs comprise the largest component of the public health workforce. Public Health Nursing is uniquely positioned to address immediate and short-term needs of priority populations while also reducing the future downstream burden on the health system.

PHNs practice in diverse settings with roles that are designed to meet a variety of population health objectives focusing on health equity and upstream approaches. Public Health Nursing is a specialty form of nursing combining general nursing knowledge and skills with [knowledge and competencies](#) that are specific to the unique mandate of public health.

The Chief Medical Officer of Health’s 2022 report [Being Ready: Ensuring Public Health Preparedness for Infectious Outbreaks and Pandemics](#) outlines the importance of funding an adequate and flexible public health workforce to meet the current and future needs of Ontario. In this report, the Chief Medical Officer of Health points to the need for a skilled, adaptable and resilient public health workforce that is cross trained in core public health work and has the surge capacity to respond to public health emergencies while maintaining essential public health services. Similarly, the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada’s 2021 [Report on the State of Public Health in Canada: A Vision to Transform Canada’s Public Health System](#) emphasizes a need to prioritize recruitment and of a highly skilled public health workforce.

PHNs have a broad scope of practice and skill set ranging from provision of clinical services to planning and implementing health promotion approaches. This broad scope allows them to quickly adapt and refocus efforts to meet the health needs of the community. PHNs are regulated health professionals who are trusted by the community and skilled at building relationships to plan and implement programs and services that meet local community needs. Furthermore, PHNs are experienced in working with priority populations and communities that face health inequities. As demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, PHNs can shift practice quickly, relying on a range of nursing and public health knowledge and competencies to meet emerging health needs and priorities of the community. The [School Focused Nurses Evaluation](#) demonstrates that PHNs are a well-positioned key partner to advance an integrated system that works to achieve health and wellness outcomes in community settings. Over the course of the pandemic, PHNs worked as part of an integrated team to ensure that an unprecedented number of people were vaccinated in a short period of time. Vaccination and other public health measures, such as case management and infection prevention and control measures, ensured the protection of the most vulnerable members of our population and created a context in which schools could reopen safely.

In clinical settings, PHNs are independent practitioners who operate at full scope of practice (as defined by the [Regulated Health Professions Act](#) and [Nursing Act](#)) as well as under broad medical directives and delegations. Traditionally, clinical services operated by public health units (PHUs) have a different mandate than primary care in that services are aimed at protecting the health of the population through treatment of the individual. Examples of clinical services provided by public health nurses include:

Program Area	Examples of Programs and Interventions
Vaccine Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community, school-based and outreach vaccine clinics</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enforcement of <a href="#"><i>Immunization of School Pupils Act</i></a></li> <li>• Mass immunization clinics</li> <li>• Building and maintaining local support and surge capacity through partnerships.</li> </ul>
Sexual Health Clinics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screening, testing and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and blood borne infections of public health concern</li> </ul>
Harm Reduction Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immunization</li> <li>• Screening, testing and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and blood borne infections of public health concern</li> <li>• Provision of harm reduction supplies and education for people who have barriers accessing traditional health care</li> <li>• Provision of harm reduction supplies and education for people who have barriers accessing traditional health care</li> <li>• Building local support and surge capacity through partnerships.</li> </ul>

In health promotion focused settings, public health develops upstream approaches and delivers early intervention programming. In these roles, PHNs work with school and community planning tables to influence a health in all policy approach and the creation of physical and social environments that support health. In this area, PHNs work upstream to impact long-term population health goals that increase mental health and wellbeing and decrease the number of people who develop chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes.

The nursing process includes community health assessment; program planning, implementation, and evaluation; and policy advocacy. To do this work, PHNs draw on their general nursing knowledge, as well as specialized public health science and competencies in health equity, policy analysis, research, advocacy, community development, epidemiology, communication, and intersectoral collaboration (e.g.: primary care, hospitals, social services, municipalities, Ministry of Health, education, and other partners). Some examples of health promotion focused programs include:

Program Area	Examples of Programs and Interventions
School Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School policies and environments that build resilience, support healthy behaviours and prevent chronic diseases and poor mental health</li> <li>• Healthy transitions (school readiness, elementary to secondary, and secondary to post-secondary/workforce)</li> </ul>
Healthy Growth and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breastfeeding friendly spaces</li> <li>• Early identification for children’s developmental delay and referral pathways</li> </ul>
Chronic Disease Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smoke-free hospital policies in collaboration with acute care sector</li> <li>• Increased bike lanes in collaboration with municipalities</li> <li>• Healthy built environments in collaboration with municipalities</li> <li>• Healthy menu choices</li> </ul>

Home-visiting (HV) is a significant component of public health nursing as part of the Healthy Babies Healthy Children Program protocol. Although conducted in the home, the role is very different than Home Health Nursing and Primary Care Nursing. PHNs utilize nursing knowledge and the nursing process to assess, plan, implement and evaluate interventions at the family level. Taking a health equity approach, PHNs provide interventions with at-risk families to enhance healthy growth and development, support infant feeding, positive attachment, and mental health and wellbeing. PHN interventions include addressing social determinants of health; building parenting capacity; assisting with behaviour change based on family needs; screening/early identification of developmental concerns; and case coordination. HV PHNs develop therapeutic relationships, conduct motivational interviewing, and collaborate with partners (with health care, social services, justice, municipal, and others) to support the family. It is well documented that intervening in the early years provides the building blocks for educational attainment, economic productivity, and lifelong health.

### **Adequate Funding to Leverage Existing Public Health Infrastructure**

The health system is currently experiencing a significant health human resource shortage. Although local public health units are able to recruit nurses in this broader context, temporary funding for temporary nursing positions has led to challenges with retention of qualified, skilled and competent PHN staff.

Through increased and stabilized permanent funding for public health nurses, local public health units can flexibly respond to community needs and achieve the desired outcomes by scaling up or introducing interventions that support the Province's identified priorities and enhancing community and societal readiness for future public health emergencies across the province.

In areas where there is a clear focus on population health outcomes, PHNs have established relationships and integrated models of care with primary care (e.g.: vaccine cold chain), long-term care (e.g.: infection prevention and control), education (e.g.: foundations for a healthy school), and other health and social service partners (e.g.: safe consumption and treatment sites). Public health nursing expertise and existing public health programs can be leveraged at the local level to address health systems pressures in the short and long-term through health systems partnerships and collaboration.