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June 2024

The Honourable Sylvia Jones  
Deputy Premier, Minister of Health  
*Delivered via email: [sylvia.jones@pc.ola.org](mailto:sylvia.jones@pc.ola.org)*

Dear Minister Jones:

**Re: Public Health Ontario Laboratory Closure - Timmins**

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On June 12, 2024, at a regular meeting of the Board for the Timiskaming Health Unit, the Board considered the correspondence from Porcupine Health Unit, regarding the potential closing of the Public Health Ontario Laboratory in Timmins.

The following motion was passed:

**WHEREAS** the Timiskaming Health Unit Board of Health recognizes the importance of access to diagnostic services for many community members across our vast region;

**BE IT RESOLVED THAT** the Timiskaming Health Unit Board of Health endorse the correspondence from Porcupine Health Unit and urge the government to further consider other opportunities before closing the Timmins public Health Laboratory site ; and

**FURTHER THAT** a copy of the letter of support be sent to the Minister of Health, PHO President/CEO, Premier of Ontario, Chief Medical of Health, and the Ontario Boards of Health.

We appreciate your attention to this important public health concern.

Sincerely,

Stacy Wight, Board of Health Chair

Copy to:

Dr. Michael Sherar, President and Chief Executive Officer Public Health Ontario  
Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario  
Board of Health for the Porcupine Health Unit Member Municipalities  
Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health and Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Health Ontario  
George Pirie, Member of Provincial Parliament - Timmins,  
Guy Bourgoin, Member of Provincial Parliament – Mushkegowuk – James Bay  
John Vanthof, Member of Provincial Parliament – Timiskaming-Cochrane  
Charlie Angus, Member of Parliament, Timmins – James Bay  
Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA), Ontario Boards of Health

May 24, 2024

The Honourable Sylvia Jones  
Minister of Health  
College Park, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
777 Bay Street  
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Dear Minister Jones,

**Re: Provincial Laboratory Closure**

At its meeting on April 25, 2024, the Board of Health for the Porcupine Health Unit passed the following motion:

**That** the Board of Health for the Porcupine Health Unit directs the Board Chair and MOH/CEO to write a letter on behalf of the Board highlighting concerns regarding the Public Health Ontario Provincial lab closure in Timmins; and,

**Furthermore**, that the letter be circulated to the member municipalities seeking support.

We are extremely concerned about the potential closing of the Public Health Ontario Laboratory in Timmins, as recommended in the December 2023 Auditor General of Ontario report *Value-for Money Audit: Public Health Ontario*. Closing the Timmins Public Health Laboratory will compromise our region's access to diagnostic services, the PHU's critical response time in addressing potential public health crises, as well as well water testing for many community members across our vast region.

The local Public Health Ontario Laboratory team in Timmins is a key public health partner in the timely detection and monitoring of diseases of public health significance for the region. The services provided by the Timmins Public Health Laboratory were instrumental in expediting COVID-19 testing during the pandemic and remain central to outbreak investigations and essential public health work. The team consistently demonstrates professionalism and dedication to ensuring reliable and efficient access to diagnostic testing and results, supporting a large complex region already facing significant health inequities.

Local access to laboratory services is essential in preventing the spread of infectious diseases and promoting public health. The Porcupine Health Unit (PHU) is the largest geographic health unit in the province, at over 270 thousand square kilometers, and the Timmins lab is the local lab for many municipalities and First Nation communities, some of which are a 5 hours drive, and some accessible by plane or train only. With a population

facing poorer health status than provincial average in many indicators, and as such many are at risk of poor outcomes from infectious diseases. With transportation time to even our local lab in Timmins inevitable for some communities, any further delays can have significant impacts on the health and well-being of the population. Consideration of the unique needs of rural and northern communities and the ever-increasing challenges in accessing services to support health in these areas will only be exacerbated if access to timely laboratory services are removed. Recent and ongoing history of large and complex outbreaks, including but not limited to COVID-19; blastomycosis, tuberculosis, demonstrate the need for local laboratory support. The Public Health Laboratory team in Timmins understands this context and is a critical public health partner in promoting and protecting the health of the region.

The Public Health Laboratory in Timmins plays a critical role in ensuring safe drinking water for many across the vast PHU region, providing access to private well water testing for community members, and small drinking water systems. The PHU region is geographically large at 274 thousand square kilometers, remote, and sparsely populated with many not serviced by municipal water treatment facilities. Accessible and timely water testing is integral to ensuring safe drinking water for our population, and in meeting the accountabilities of the Ontario Public Health Standards.

The Timmins Public Health Laboratory plays a crucial role in supporting public health, health care providers and institutions, patients, families and communities with their diagnostic services and their loss would leave a significant gap. If recommendations to close the Timmins location are followed, the next closest Public Health Ontario Laboratory location is Sudbury, at a distance of 293 kilometers from Timmins, and that much farther for other communities. Highway closures for accidents and inclement weather are all too common in the North and already impact transportation for timely access to testing, any further travel required will continue to impact response times to protect and promote the health and safety of the PHU population.

The Board of Health respectfully urge careful consideration before adopting recommendations to close the Timmins Public Health Laboratory site, which is critical to supporting our health care and public health teams in safeguarding the health and promoting the well-being of our community members. We would be pleased to contribute to collaborations exploring opportunities to continued operations of the essential facility, recognizing metrics and solutions need to be different in the north in assessing the impacts of such immense changes.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to any engagement opportunity to continue to prioritize the health of our complex region.

Sincerely,



Michelle Boileau  
Board of Health Chair



Dr. Lianne Catton  
Medical Officer of Health/Chief Executive Officer

Cc: Dr. Michael Sherar, President and Chief Executive Officer Public Health Ontario  
Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario  
Board of Health for the Porcupine Health Unit Member Municipalities  
Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health and Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Health Ontario  
George Pirie, Member of Provincial Parliament - Timmins,  
Guy Bourgoin, Member of Provincial Parliament – Mushkegowuk – James Bay  
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