

Terms of Reference: Ontario Public Health Emergencies Science Advisory Committee

Updated: March 2025

Background

Public Health Ontario (PHO) is a Crown corporation dedicated to protecting and promoting the health of all Ontarians and reducing health inequities. PHO provides expert scientific and technical advice and support relating to immunization, infection prevention and control; surveillance and epidemiology; health promotion, chronic disease and injury prevention; environmental and occupational health; health emergency preparedness; and public health laboratory services to support health providers, the public health system and partner ministries in making informed decisions and taking informed action to improve the health and security of Ontarians.

The Ontario Public Health Emergencies Science Advisory Committee (OPHESAC, 'the Committee') was established in September 2022 at the request of the Ministry of Health. As an External Scientific Advisory Committee of Public Health Ontario, the Committee operates according to PHO's policy on External Scientific and Program Advisory Committees.

Mandate

The Committee will bring a perspective from outside PHO based on knowledge, skills and experience to provide PHO with scientific and technical advice related to public health emergencies. Advice will be sought in areas consistent with PHO's mission, vision, mandate, and values. Advice will be provided to PHO and, where appropriate, through PHO to the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH), Ministry of Health (MOH).

Scope

The Committee will bring together diverse scientific expertise to provide input into preparing for, mitigating, responding to and/or recovering from all-hazards public health emergencies with a focus on highly probable, imminent or occurring threats that compromise the health of a population and have the potential to have substantial impact on morbidity and mortality. Such public health emergencies would have the potential to involve the activation of emergency response structures and the current or anticipated inability of local capacity to respond, requiring provincial coordination and capacity.*

*Note: The Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act defines an emergency as "a situation or an impending situation that constitutes a danger of major proportions that could result in serious harm to persons or substantial damage to property that is caused by the forces of nature, a disease or other health risk, an accident or an act whether intentional or otherwise".

The Committee's activities may include:

- Responding to requests for scientific and technical input from PHO and OCMOH pertaining to potential or evolving public health emergencies;
- Providing scientific input into the identification of relevant knowledge gaps that will enhance Ontario's capacity to respond to public health emergencies, including advice on lessons learned during previous public health emergencies to respond to public health emergencies in the future;
- Identifying and liaising, where appropriate, with other relevant groups or individuals that may be beneficial to a public health emergency in Ontario; and
- Participating in emergency preparedness exercises.

During a public health emergency response, the scope of the Committee may be adjusted to support the provincial response. PHO may adjust the terms of reference as needed to support the provincial response.

Health equity is a central component of the Committee's scientific advice, consistent with PHO's legislated objects. Improving health equity and addressing the needs of populations which may be disproportionately affected by public health emergencies** will be a priority in the scientific advice provided.

When not in a public health emergency, the Committee is expected to meet approximately 2-4 times per year.

Work of the Committee should not duplicate the core work of PHO or other existing scientific advisory committees. Clinical therapeutics, including drugs and vaccines, are outside the mandate of this Committee. The generation of de novo research, epidemiology, economic analyses and mathematical modelling are out-of-scope, but available evidence may be considered in the course of the Committee's work.

PHO is committed to transparency in all its work including with its scientific advisory committees, subject to the protocols required by [PHO's Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\) with the MOH](#). It is expected that the Committee's advice will also follow this same commitment to transparency.

**Note: These populations may be adversely affected due to inequities such as social determinants of health including Indigeneity, race, gender, income or immigration status; and/or may be more likely to be exposed to a public health threat, more likely to experience a serious impact because of exposure, less likely to access or benefit from public health measures or treatment and/or who may be negatively affected by response and recovery measures.

Governance

Committee members are appointed by and act in an advisory capacity to PHO through the PHO Executive Liaison designated by the President and CEO. PHO will solicit the input and advice of current members with respect to skillsets and identification of new members of the committee (see section on [Members](#) for information on the process).

Transparency and Conflicts of Interest

PHO is committed to the principles of transparency of data and information, scientific and technical advice, conflicts of interest, and activity of the Committee.

Committee information posted publicly may include, but is not limited to:

- terms of reference;
- membership and associated biographies;
- members' conflict of interest disclosures; and
- advice and recommendations.

All members will complete written conflict of interest disclosures prior to beginning their term as members of OPHE SAC and before the first committee meeting. This form must be updated, as requested by PHO, and as members identify relevant conflicts of interest. Conflict of interest information may be made available on the PHO website and on request.

Committee recommendations released publicly will be subject to notification procedures outlined in section on [External Communication](#). The default will be public release of the Committee's recommendations. From time-to-time, the Committee may be requested to provide confidential advice that will only be released publicly with consent of the requestor or as required by law.

Membership

Committee members provide a valuable service to Ontario's public health system and PHO. Committee membership is voluntary. Members are not compensated for their contributions.

Chair and Vice Chair

The PHO President and CEO will appoint the Chair and Vice Chair with input from a Nominating Committee chaired by the PHO Executive Liaison. It is expected that the Chair and Vice Chair will have complementary scientific and/or practice backgrounds.

The Chair and Vice Chair are accountable to the PHO President and CEO and will be responsible for working with the PHO Executive Liaison, Scientific Liaison, Program Liaison and committee members to develop the committee work plan. The work plan will be reviewed and re-aligned, as needed.

Members

OPHE SAC membership is multidisciplinary in nature with expertise, experience and leadership in various domains required for the management of public health and related health system threats and emergencies, including and not limited to various clinical specialties and scientific disciplines (e.g., public health, Indigenous health, epidemiology and surveillance, emergency planning, immunology, infectious diseases, microbiology, environmental health, veterinary science, health economics, behavioural science, and implementation science). Furthermore, membership will include persons with expertise in health equity, social justice, anti-racism, cultural safety, and ethics).

A nominating committee will identify new members through calls for interest, nominations from academic and public health institutions and input from existing members. Final decision for membership based on the recommendations of the nominating committee will rest with PHO's President and CEO.

It is expected that many members will have expertise in multiple domains. The total membership of the committee will not exceed fifteen (including the Chair and Vice Chair). During acute public health emergencies, the membership may expand on a time-limited basis, with the approval of PHO's President and CEO, to include additional expertise specific to the nature of the public health emergency.

To the extent possible, representation will be sought from diverse clinical specialties and scientific disciplines, practice contexts (e.g., academia, clinical practice, public health practice, community-based services) and geographies (e.g., urban, northern/rural/remote). PHO aims to reflect diverse population groups in Ontario, to the extent possible, including Indigenous peoples.

Members are appointed to the Committee as individual experts. However, it is expected that members may consult with scientific colleagues to help arrive at the best advice, whilst maintaining confidentiality around the content of discussions undertaken by the Committee.

Non-Member Attendees (Observers)

All non-member attendees are non-voting. These Observers may participate in discussions, but are not permitted to share information from Committee discussions without permission of the Chair and PHO Executive Liaison.

The Committee will include standing Observers who will include the following:

- Up to 2 representatives from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Ministry of Health
- Up to 1 representative from Emergency Management Ontario
- Up to 1 representative from the Public Health Agency of Canada

The Chair may, by invitation, include other Observers on a meeting or topic-specific basis. Such individuals will not be considered members.

PHO Secretariat and other support staff as needed will attend meetings to provide support and contribute to discussions.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Committee is responsible for providing credible, relevant, balanced, and accurate scientific and technical advice within the scope of PHO's mandate, based on the best available evidence. As per [Mandate](#) section above, advice will be provided to PHO and, where appropriate, through PHO to the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH), Ministry of Health (MOH).

Appointments and Reappointments

Details on the terms and conditions of appointments are provided in [Appendix A](#).

Meeting Process and Quorum

The Committee will meet approximately 2-4 times a year and may meet more frequently during public health emergency responses to provide timely advice to inform the response.

Two-thirds of all members will constitute a quorum. The Chair and Vice Chair will be counted towards quorum. Every effort will be made to ensure that members have documentation relevant to the agenda before the meeting.

The Committee will be governed by a consensus-seeking process. To the extent possible, advice reflects the considered consensus of the members. During all meetings, the Chair will encourage discussion based on differing interpretations of research, scientific and practice evidence as a legitimate and necessary part of the research and scientific processes and, where appropriate, ensure that these differences are made explicit and accurately represented. If a vote is required to resolve specific issues within a report or recommendation, the Chair will ensure any votes are focused on specific issues.

When consensus cannot be reasonably achieved, two-thirds majority of those in attendance will prevail, provided quorum is met. The Chair may vote, if needed, to achieve a two-thirds majority. Dissenting opinion will be summarized in the meeting minutes. If a recommendation or motion does not receive approval from two-thirds majority, the item will be referred back to the originator for further work. Should consensus be achieved, but quorum not met, the item will be referred to the next meeting or an electronic poll may be conducted to obtain a decision on time-sensitive recommendations.

If a member is not able to attend a meeting, they should inform the Secretariat in advance. Members may not appoint an alternate. If a member misses three consecutive meetings or a majority of meetings (more than half) held within a calendar year (whichever is greater), the attendance of that member will be reviewed by the Chair and PHO Executive Liaison. After such review and discussion with the member as to their ability to fully participate in the Committee, the member may be asked to step down. If a member is not able to attend called meetings for an extended period due to illness or other reason, that member should inform the Chair and through the nominating process a replacement may be selected.

Minutes, including attendance, will be recorded at all meetings and circulated to all members prior to the next meeting.

Working Groups and Access to External Expertise

Outside of public health emergencies, working groups of the Committee may not be created. Should additional expertise be required, members may be asked to consult within their networks of expertise; Observers may be included in Committee meetings (see section on [Non-Member Attendees](#)); and/or PHO will consult with other stakeholders and bring any recommendation(s) to the Committee for approval or endorsement.

Relationship with Private Sector Entities

The Committee may determine that a meeting with a private sector entity is required to inform its deliberations. Invitations to private sector entities will follow PHO's policy on Relationships with Private Sector Entities.

External Communication

The Committee's scientific and technical advice that is to be made public will be posted to the PHO website in accordance with PHO processes and MOH notification requirements set out in PHO's MOU with the MOU.¹

The Chair is the designated spokesperson for the Committee. Public commentary by the Chair will be through consultation with the PHO Executive Liaison.

The Committee's public and media communications (including social media) will be in alignment with PHO's Media Relations Policy and PHO's MOU with the MOH, including the special requirements during activation of provincial emergency response structures. The Chair will inform the PHO Executive

Liaison regarding any and all requests for public or media comments related to the work of the Committee. The PHO Executive Liaison will notify MOH partners and inform the Chair when such notifications have been completed.

Committee members may speak publicly as independent scientists and practitioners but may not speak publicly on behalf of the Committee, unless specifically asked to do so by the Chair and PHO Executive Liaison.

Review of Terms of Reference

These terms of reference will be reviewed after the first year and then every two years by the Committee (sooner, if required). Any proposed revisions will be approved by PHO's President and CEO before being finalized and incorporated.

Additional process documents may be developed and refined iteratively.

Evaluation

PHO may initiate an evaluation of the Committee as needed. The scope of reviews or evaluations may include but not be limited to the mandate, activities, functions, effectiveness, outcomes and ongoing relevance of the Committee. Recommendations for improvement will be considered on an ongoing basis. PHO retains the authority to determine the continued or future state of the Committee and may consult with others (e.g. MOH, OCMOH, and members).

PHO Support

Secretariat support for the Committee is provided by PHO. The secretariat will provide planning and administrative support. This includes ensuring all logistical supports are in place, preparing and distributing material. The secretariat will also provide support for coordinating background materials needed for Committee deliberation.

Knowledge exchange, product development and communications support will be made available to the Committee through PHO as required.

Review, Approval and Clearance of Scientific and Technical Products for Public Release

While the Committee is responsible for the content of its advice, PHO is responsible for the use of the Committee's advice.

Decisions on publication will be made by the Chair and subject to PHO's notification protocols with government and accessibility and French language requirements.

Appendix A: Details on Appointment, Re-appointment and Termination

Appointment of members is in accordance with PHO's Policy on External Advisory Committees. PHO appoints members and sets terms for each appointment (and potential reappointment).

When recruiting candidates, PHO may at its discretion:

- Issue open and targeted calls through publichealthontario.ca or other communication channels.
- Invite expressions of interest or nominations in consultation with relevant clients, partners or stakeholders.
- Directly approach/invite individuals.

Appointment of Members

- Appointed by PHO's President and CEO.
- Membership terms are two years in length.
- A member may be reappointed for up to two additional terms of up to two years to allow for continuity and a systematic rotation of membership (total maximum allowable years for membership is six).
- Exceptions to the maximum appointment may be made, depending on individual circumstances and a committee's needs; for example, in circumstances where an individual takes on a committee leadership role.

To formalize participation on the Committee and help members understand the expectations of being a member, appointees must acknowledge and agree with the Terms of Conditions of membership as outlined in their appointment letter.

When a member's term is complete and they wish to continue with the Committee (subject to maximum allowable terms), PHO will determine if reappointment should be recommended in consultation with others, including but not limited to the Chair and Vice Chair. Current members may be consulted as needed.

Either the President and CEO through the PHO Executive Liaison or the member may at any time, for any reason, terminate a member's appointment upon written notice to the other.

Appointment of the Chair and Vice Chair

PHO selects and appoints the Chair and Vice Chair.

- Appointed by PHO's President and CEO on the advice of the Nominating Committee following consultation with the Chair and PHO Executive Liaison.
- Terms are two years in length.
- May be reappointed for one additional term of up to two years (total maximum allowable years as Chair is four).

The provisions under "Appointment of Members" apply to the Chair in the same way as other members.