

Terms of Reference: Public Health Ethics Advisory Committee of Ontario (PHEACO)

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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 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 Public Health Ethics Advisory Committee of Ontario (PHEACO) ('the Committee') was established on November 25, 2025, at the request of the Ministry of Health (MOH) to provide advice on ethical issues of public health significance to PHO and where appropriate, through PHO to the MOH and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH).

As an external expert advisory committee of PHO, the advisory group operates according to *PHO's Policy on External Scientific and Program Advisory Committees*.

Mandate

The Committee will bring together diverse ethics expertise based on knowledge, skills, and experience. The Committee's role is to provide timely advice on complex public health ethics issues and to make recommendations that will support public health decision-making, including the response to public health emergencies and outbreaks. Advice will be sought in areas consistent with PHO's mission, vision, mandate, and values and will be provided to PHO, including PHO's external advisory committees, and where appropriate through PHO to the OCMOH, and MOH.

Scope

The Committee will provide ethical advice and recommendations on public health related activities in the following areas:

- Public health response
- Public health measures and indicators
- Surveillance and epidemiology
- Antiviral and vaccine distribution and allocation
- Public health emergency management
- Emerging ethical issues in health promotion, disease control and injury prevention
- Program planning and implementation
- Priority issues of provincial significance, as requested by PHO, and where appropriate, through PHO on behalf of PHO's external advisory committees, the OCMOH or the MOH

Governance

Committee members are appointed by and act in an advisory capacity to PHO through the PHO Executive Liaison designated by the PHO President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO). PHO has the ultimate decision-making authority, control and accountability for all aspects related to the operation and management of the Committee and may consult with others, as appropriate. This includes the use of technical advice and reports generated by the Committee.

Transparency and Conflicts of Interest

PHO is committed to the principles of transparency of data and information, scientific and technical advice, conflict of interest disclosures, and Committee activities, in accordance with [PHO's Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\) with the MOH](#). Committee information posted publicly will include, but is not limited to:

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

Committee members are expected to avoid real, apparent, perceived, and potential conflicts of interest. As a condition of appointment, each Committee member shall:

- Submit a summary of their professional expertise, experience and affiliations.
- Complete a *Conflict-of-Interest Declaration Form*, prior to the commencement of their term and before the first committee meeting.
- Update the *Conflict-of-Interest Declaration Form* upon request by PHO, or upon identification of any new or relevant conflicts of interest.

PHO will publish on its website a summary of each committee member's expertise, experience, affiliations and conflicts of interest. Members will be provided an opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of this information prior to its release.

Committee recommendations will generally be released publicly in accordance with the notification procedures outlined in the section on External Communication. However, on occasion, the Committee may be asked to provide confidential advice, which will only be released publicly with the approval of PHO or as required by law. Requests will originate from PHO and, where applicable, on behalf of the MOH, OCMOH or another PHO external advisory committee. The PHO Executive Liaison, in consultation with the requestor, will determine whether the advice should be considered confidential.

Membership

Committee members provide valuable service to Ontario's public health system and PHO. Committee membership is voluntary, and members will not be compensated for their contributions.

Chair and Vice Chair

The PHO President and CEO will appoint the Chair and Vice Chair with input from the PHO Executive Liaison. Both the Chair and Vice Chair will be external. Terms are two years in length with the option of one additional term of up to two years (a total maximum of four years). With approval from the President and CEO, the length of the term may be extended to a maximum of three terms (a total maximum of six years).

Members

Members are appointed by PHO's President and CEO with input from a Nominating Committee chaired by the PHO Executive Liaison. The Nominating Committee will consist of the PHO Executive Liaison, PHO Ethics Liaison, and the Committee Chair, at a minimum. Member terms are two years in length with the option of two additional terms of up to two years (a total maximum of six years) to allow for continuity and a systematic rotation of membership.

The Committee will consist of at least five and no more than eight members, including the Chair and Vice Chair. In consultation with the Chair, PHO may adjust the number of members as needed to ensure the Committee reflects a broad and appropriate range of knowledge, expertise, experience and perspectives. Committee members will bring expertise and leadership in ethical domains such as ethical theory, public health ethics, research ethics, clinical ethics, public health law, bioethics or related fields. More specifically, members will demonstrate:

- technical knowledge in bioethics and/or ethics (e.g., graduate training in bioethics or equivalent);
- recognition as leaders in public health ethics, research ethics, clinical ethics, bioethics or public health law;
- practical or clinical experience in community medicine, epidemiology and/or public health; and
- first-hand experience as a public health professional.

Efforts will be made to ensure representation from diverse public health specialties and disciplines, practice contexts (e.g., academia, clinical practice, public health practice, community-based services) and geographic regions (e.g., urban, northern, rural/remote, etc.). Inclusion of perspectives from underrepresented and marginalized communities, including Indigenous peoples, will be considered to the extent possible. When specific disciplinary expertise or community perspective are needed and not available within the Committee, external experts may be invited to participate as guest attendees (see section on Non-Members).

Committee members are appointed as individual experts and may consult with colleagues for informed advice, provided confidentiality of Committee discussions is maintained.

Non-members (presenters, invited guests, and observers)

The Chair may, by invitation, include presenters, observers or invited guests on a meeting or topic-specific basis. These individuals are not considered members. Examples include students attending for educational purposes and subject matter experts contributing to discussions. They may not disclose committee-related discussions without prior approval of the Chair and PHO Executive Liaison.

The Committee will include the following standing observers:

- Up to two representatives from the OCMOH and MOH
- Up to one representative from the Public Health Agency of Canada's Public Health Ethics Consultative Group (PHECG), to ensure cross jurisdictional alignment with PHAC.
- PHO Executive Liaison (PHO Executive overseeing PHO's Ethics Services Team)
- PHO Ethics Liaison (Management and staff of PHO's Ethics Services Team)
- PHO Ethics Review Board Chair
- PHO staff providing Secretariat support
- Other external staff providing Secretariat support

Appointment and Re-appointment Process

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.

At least two months prior to the end of a member's term, they are expected to notify the Committee Chair of their interest in continuing with the Committee (subject to maximum allowable terms for the Committee). When a member's term is complete and they wish to continue with the Committee, the President and CEO through the PHO Executive Liaison will determine potential reappointment options in consultation with the PHO Ethics Liaison and Committee Chair.

Resignation and Termination

A member may resign by providing written notice to the Committee Chair and PHO Secretariat, preferably at least 14 days in advance. The notice should specify the effective date of the resignation. The President and CEO through the PHO Executive Liaison, may terminate a member's appointment at any time with written notice. Termination is effective upon receipt of the written notice or at a mutually determined date. Grounds for termination include, but are not limited to, breaches of confidentiality, repeated failure to participate in meetings or respond to requests for input, and other activities that are contrary to the *Terms of Reference and Membership Agreement*.

Roles and Responsibilities

Chair

The Chair is accountable to the PHO President and CEO and will be responsible for working collaboratively with the PHO Executive Liaison to carry out the Committee's mandate. The Chair will also work with the PHO Ethics Liaison and PHO Secretariat to set agendas and plan the work of the Committee. The Chair, has additional responsibilities, including:

- Advises PHO on the selection of committee members.
- Collaborates with the Executive Liaison to determine the appropriateness, feasibility and prioritization of incoming requests.
- Takes all reasonable steps to avoid any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest.
- Immediately notifies the PHO Executive Liaison of any circumstances that may result in a conflict of interest.
- Reviews and refers conflict of interest declarations to the PHO Executive Liaison.
- Manages conflict of interest declarations at each meeting and makes determinations as needed.
- Ensures quorum before every meeting and coordinates attendance with the PHO Secretariat.
- Chairs committee meetings and facilitates open and constructive discussions among members in fulfillment of the Committee's mandate.
- Invites observers or subject matter experts as appropriate to support deliberations.
- Conducts final review of meeting minutes, agendas, and records.
- Speaks on behalf of the Committee and provides advanced notice to the PHO Executive Liaison for all requests for public and media comments; does not speak on behalf of PHO.

- Seeks consensus on the Committee's recommendations or advice; where consensus is not achieved, ensures differing views are documented in the meeting records.
- Directs the development of materials for Committee discussions, including literature reviews and synthesis of Committee deliberations.
- Oversees the preparation and delivery of the Committee's recommendations, advice or reporting to PHO.
- Supports, in any other way, the fulfillment of the Committee's mandate.

Vice Chair

At the request of the Chair, or in the Chair's absence, the Vice Chair will assume the Chair's duties, including those outlined in Section 7.3.

Members

Members of the Committee are responsible for providing their best advice to PHO. Other responsibilities include:

- Attends all committee meetings and actively participate.
- Provides feedback on draft reports and knowledge products of Committee discussions and recommendations.
- Offers expert advice aligned with the Committee's mandate.
- Notifies the Chair of any public or media comment requests.
- Takes all reasonable steps to avoid any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest.
- Immediately notifies the Committee Chair of circumstances that may result in a conflict of interest.
- Does not represent PHO or the work of the Committee without prior written approval from the PHO Executive Liaison.

PHO Executive Liaison

The PHO Executive Liaison is appointed by PHO's President and CEO. The PHO Executive Liaison works closely with the Committee Chair, PHO Ethics Liaison and PHO Secretariat support staff to make decisions about the administration and operation of the Committee. Specific responsibilities for the PHO Executive Liaison include:

- Assembles and chairs a Nominating Committee to recommend a Chair, Vice Chair and Members.
- Serves as primary point of contact for new requests.
- In consultation with the Committee Chair and PHO Ethics Liaison, determines the appropriateness, feasibility and prioritization of incoming requests.
- Provides leadership and strategic advice in the management, operation and oversight of the committee, working closely with the Chair, PHO Ethics Liaison and PHO Secretariat.
- With the PHO Secretariat, ensures that committee members are properly informed about the *Terms of Reference* and any other relevant information in a timely manner.
- Advises the PHO Secretariat on committee operations.

- Ensures the preparation of committee meeting minutes, agendas, and records by the PHO Secretariat.
- Refers committee advice, recommendations and/or knowledge products to the President and CEO for risk management purposes.
- Ensures notification to MOH of the release of committee advice and/or knowledge products.
- Reviews and addresses conflict of interest declarations brought forward by the Committee Chair.

PHO Secretariat

PHO will provide planning and administrative support to the Committee. This includes ensuring all logistical supports are in place, preparing and distributing material. Knowledge exchange, product development and communications support will be made available to the Committee through PHO as required. Specific PHO Secretariat responsibilities for PHO include:

- Coordinates all membership and appointment processes, working closely with the PHO Executive Liaison, PHO Ethics Liaison and Committee Chair. This includes organizing orientation for new members.
- Makes all arrangements for committee meetings and events, including preparing agendas (working closely with the Chair and PHO Ethics Liaison), ensuring quorum, compiling and distributing materials as appropriate, booking meetings, processing expenses, and arranging external assistance if needed.
- Develops and maintains minutes and all committee records.
- Coordinates review and publishing of committee knowledge products/advice.
- Working with the Chair, coordinates a process for regular review and evaluation of the Committee's operations.
- Assists the Chair in carrying out their responsibilities.
- Supports the Committee in the implementation and adherence of the Terms of Reference.
- Other related duties as assigned by the PHO Executive Liaison or Chair.

PHO Ethics Liaison

The PHO Ethics Liaison serves as the representative for PHO's Ethics Services, providing strategic guidance to support the Committee's direction and priorities. Key responsibilities include:

- Advises the PHO Executive Liaison and Committee Chair on member appointments, reappointments and terminations.
- Maintains member and partner relationships and identifies emerging issues for escalation.
- Supports the assessment and prioritization of incoming requests.
- Reviews Committee outputs as a subject matter expert and identifies organizational risks to be brought forward to the PHO Executive Liaison.
- Advises the Committee Chair on the preparation of materials for Committee discussions, including literature reviews and synthesis of deliberations.
- Develops and disseminates knowledge products summarizing Committee advice.
- Performs additional duties as assigned by the PHO Executive Liaison or Committee Chair.

Meetings and Recommendations

The Committee will meet by videoconference approximately 2-4 times a year and may meet more frequently as needed at the discretion of the Chair and with agreement of members.

Meeting Attendance and Invitations

Meetings will be limited to Committee members, PHO Secretariat and designated support staff. Additional attendees including observers, guest participants and presenters may be invited to attend specific meetings with prior approval from the Chair and in consultation with the PHO Executive Liaison. Meeting invitations are sent by the PHO Secretariat. The PHO Secretariat is responsible for coordinating logistics and ensuring appropriate communication with attendees.

To hold a meeting, quorum must be met. At least 50 percent plus one of the members of the Committee must be present to constitute quorum. The Chair or Vice-Chair will be counted towards quorum.

Agenda

The Chair, in consultation with the PHO Secretariat, sets the meeting agenda in response to requests issued through the PHO Executive Liaison. Members may raise agenda items for consideration to the Chair. Every effort will be made to ensure that members have an agenda and any relevant documentation, five working days before the meeting. Minutes, including attendance, will be recorded at all meetings and circulated to all members prior to the next meeting.

Recommendations

The Committee shall strive to provide consensus-based advice. In instances where consensus cannot be reached, the meeting record will reflect the diversity of opinions. In such cases, the Chair will continue to facilitate deliberation on unresolved matters, consulting with Committee members and colleagues as needed, while maintaining confidentiality. Items requiring further discussion may be revisited at subsequent meetings or resolved via electronic poll if time sensitive.

Advice from the Committee will be provided to PHO in the form of records of discussion, reports, or recommendations, summarizing the proceedings to effectively reflect the advice offered. While the Committee is responsible for the content of its advice, PHO is responsible for the use of the Committee's advice. Records, recommendations or reports will be drafted by the Chair in collaboration with the PHO Ethics Liaison and with input from members, as determined during the meeting. These documents will be circulated for member review and confirmation. Individual remarks will not be attributed.

An annual summary of Committee activities will be prepared by the PHO Executive Liaison with support from the PHO Secretariat.

Confidentiality

Committee members are expected to maintain the confidentiality of information acquired through their involvement with the Committee, except where disclosure is permitted under the *Terms and Conditions of Membership*. Invited observers and guests may be required to sign a confidentiality agreement when deemed appropriate.

Intake Process for Requests

Requests will be initiated by PHO and, where applicable, on behalf of the MOH, OCMOH or another PHO external advisory committee. Committee requests shall be directed to the PHO Executive Liaison. Upon receipt of a request, the PHO Executive Liaison will consult with the Committee Chair and PHO Ethics Liaison to determine the appropriateness and feasibility of the request. Where necessary, the team will also prioritize requests. To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the nature and scope of the request, the requestor may be invited to meet with the Committee Chair, PHO Executive Liaison, and PHO Ethics Liaison, to clarify details and ensure alignment with the Committee's mandate.

Requests originating from PHO external advisory committees must be submitted through the respective committee's PHO Executive Liaison.

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 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 MOH](#). The Committee 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](#). Committee members and Chairs may not speak publicly on behalf of the Committee without prior approval by the President and CEO. Members and Chairs will inform the PHO Executive Liaison regarding requests for public, or media comments related to the work of the Committee.

Members may seek input from colleagues while ensuring that the confidentiality of Committee discussions is maintained.

Review of Terms of Reference

The *Terms of Reference* shall be reviewed by the Committee after the initial year of implementation and then every two years or earlier if deemed necessary. Any proposed amendments shall be subject to approval by PHO's President and CEO before being finalized and incorporated.

Evaluation

PHO may initiate an evaluation of the Committee every two years or sooner if 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 and appropriate.

Review, Approval and Clearance of Knowledge Products for Public Release

While the Committee is responsible for the content of its advice, PHO determines the use. Publication decisions are made by the PHO Executive Liaison, in consultation with the Committee Chair and in accordance with PHO's government notification protocols, accessibility requirements, and relevant authorship standards (e.g., [ICMJE Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals](#))

Where Committee advice is released publicly as a report or summary of recommendations, the PHO Secretariat will coordinate the review, approval, and clearance process. Knowledge products will be represented as follows:

Branding: Committee watermark

Authorship: Committee as a whole, with individual contributors listed as appropriate

Acknowledgements: Committee members and other contributors

Disclaimers: PHO applicable disclaimers

When knowledge products are developed independently or in collaboration with external organizations (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles), PHO's involvement in the review and approval of any publicly released materials will follow the conditions outlined above.