

July 22, 2022

The Honourable Monte McNaughton
Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development
400 University Avenue, 14th floor
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 1T7

RE: Extension of the COVID-19 Worker Income Protection Benefit

Dear Minister McNaughton:

I am writing on behalf of our 60,000 members and 157 chambers of commerce and boards of trade about the Ontario COVID-19 Worker Income Protection Benefit. As we enter the seventh wave of COVID-19, we welcome the government's decision to extend the existing program to March 31, 2023.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, your government has introduced a range of temporary measures to protect the health and safety of Ontarians. As the pandemic evolved, the Worker Income Protection Benefit proved to be a crucial support for individuals who tested positive or sought out vaccinations. We appreciate the commitment to maintaining the program while the threat of COVID-19 persists.

According to the Province's Chief Medical Officer, Ontario is now in the seventh wave of COVID-19, with 80 percent of public health units experiencing an exponential growth in cases and hospitalization rates increasing for the first time since May.

The Worker Income Protection Benefit was designed to compensate employees who do not have access to paid sick leave for time taken away from work on infectious disease emergency leave. It helped stem the transmission of the virus within workplaces and allowed many businesses stay solvent as they were forced to take on mounting debt and pandemic-related expenses.

Many businesses, particularly smaller ones, are still recovering from the pandemic and grappling with debt, supply chain constraints, and the rising costs of doing business. According to government data, the program is most heavily used by workers in the manufacturing, retail, and healthcare sectors – all of which are already confronting labour shortages that would be exacerbated with the expiration of this benefit while the virus is still actively circulating in our communities and workplaces.

Given the ongoing threat posed by COVID-19 and the rise of more contagious subvariants, an extension of the benefit is consistent with the original intent of the program and the current level of risk.

Going forward, if your government begins to consider the idea of a permanent, employer-paid sick program, it must be developed through extensive stakeholder consultations to avoid adverse consequences for the business community that could hamper economic recovery efforts.

Further, we are seeking clarity on whether the Infectious Disease Emergency Leave Regulation (O. Reg. 228/20) will also be extended beyond its planned expiration date of July 30, 2022. Under the current regulation, all non-unionized employees who were placed on a temporary layoff as a result of the pandemic are automatically on an unpaid Infectious Disease Emergency Leave (IDEL). In light of the ongoing uncertainty posed by the virus, employers must be proactively informed about changes to the regulation to ensure they have sufficient time to recall workers and prepare for potential impacts to their organizations.

Thank you for your consideration and I would welcome an opportunity to speak to you about these matters further.

Sincerely,



Rocco Rossi
President and CEO
Ontario Chamber of Commerce