

April 9, 2020

Hon. Laurie Scott
Minister of Infrastructure
5th Floor, Room 5E200
777 Bay St
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

RE: Accelerating Internet connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dear Minister Scott,

Thank you for your continued leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the situation evolves, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) is receiving concerns from the business community and communicating them to all levels of government.

The OCC and its members are deeply concerned about the disproportionate impacts the COVID-19 crisis is having on communities that lack internet connectivity. Broadband is a basic infrastructure requirement in today's economy, but the ongoing pandemic has made it even more essential to public health and economic resilience.

For businesses and workers, particularly those practicing physical distancing, connectivity is necessary to ensure they can remain productive by using digital tools such as video conferencing. Without adequate access, those in rural and remote regions will be vulnerable to additional layoffs and business closures. There are also industry-specific consequences for sectors that are predominantly rural, including agriculture, that must face the significant challenge of adapting to the crisis by rapidly shifting to online marketing and training workers virtually for the upcoming season.

Further, limited access to virtual health care (including mental health services) will have costly long-term implications for community well-being. Access to education (K to post-secondary) is also limited for students without adequate connectivity, as they struggle to participate in remote learning. This includes Indigenous and rural students whose Internet access is limited to dial-up, and students in urban centres who cannot afford home access and are unable to use public libraries and post-secondary campuses at this time.

Together with the private sector, your government must do everything it can to limit the profound impact this crisis will have on Ontario's social and regional disparities. We recommend:

- Fast-tracking the \$150 million in provincial funding that was committed to a broadband and cellular infrastructure program. While this amount is not sufficient to bridge Ontario's digital divide, accelerating the investment will help mitigate the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Working with the federal government to speed up and augment existing broadband investment programs.

- Working with municipalities to boost existing Wi-Fi hotspots.

Quebec's Ministry of Economy and Innovation is working to develop a fast-tracking mechanism to help telecommunications industry speed up current broadband expansion projects. We strongly encourage your ministry to make this a priority.

Public health and safety are priorities for all Ontario organizations. We will continue to monitor and assess new developments pertaining to COVID-19 closely and work with our members, partners, and all levels of government to provide support to Ontario communities.

Sincerely,



Rocco Rossi
President and CEO
Ontario Chamber of Commerce