

April 14, 2020

To: Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario

Premier Doug Ford

Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health (Acting)

All Members of Provincial Parliament in Ontario

Thank you for your hard work to protect the safety and good health of residents of Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand the need to maintain physical distancing due to COVID-19 and we are working with our communities to increase awareness of public health guidelines and compliance. Within this, we believe that the March 30 announcement that adds community gardens to the list of closures for recreational activities is an oversight, and unnecessarily removes critical food access to thousands of Ontarians. **Growing food in community gardens is not a recreational activity, it's an essential service, now more than ever with food disruptions and increasing food insecurity, and we ask that it be immediately included in the list of essential food services in Ontario.**

The Ontario Community Growing Network (OCGN) has worked with practitioners across the country and public health experts to develop rigorous COVID-19 safety protocols for community gardens (please see attached). The objectives of the best practices document are to identify safety precautions to avoid transmission of the virus and to ensure that garden members follow public health instructions to stay home as much as possible. This document was informed by public health guidelines from multiple jurisdictions in Canada and was written and reviewed by a team of community garden leaders across Ontario who grounded suggestions for maintaining safe practices within the realities of how gardens and gardeners work. This is the same process that has happened with other food access points, including grocery stores, restaurants and farmers' markets in Ontario.

We state very clearly that gardens that can't meet the minimum safety standards must remain closed. The recommendations address ways to maintain physical distancing, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and other methods for avoiding the transmission of the virus. We also address ways to minimize the number of people in a garden at any given time and to reduce the number of trips that gardeners make outside of the home. Gardens are to be opened strictly for minimum maintenance to enable food production, not for programming or social gatherings of any kind, nor to the public.

Community gardens need time to plan and prepare for the new reality. We need it announced now that community gardens will be exempt when the new state of emergency period is over (May 12, 2020), so that garden coordinators will have enough time to adapt the guidelines to their garden space and organizational structure, to educate garden members about the new procedures and to implement compliance strategies before gardens open. This time period is crucial for ensuring public safety and starting enough seedlings to ensure people will have food to grow. It is a time-sensitive issue, given the short growing season in Ontario.

We are requesting to urgently meet with staff from the Chief Medical Officer of Health this week to discuss in more detail how these safety strategies can be implemented.

This model of community food production is seen as integral to the COVID-19 response in countries throughout the world, particularly as food prices increase and global food supplies are increasingly uncertain. Each year, tens of thousands of households rely on community gardens to produce supplemental food for their families. In Canada, before COVID-19, 28.4% of Black

households face food insecurity, and the rate is higher for Indigenous people. The new numbers of people struggling now in our communities has increased gravely due to income loss. Access to community gardens, with a focus on increasing access to community members who are most vulnerable, is a critical response to COVID-19 to enhance food insecurity in this province. Food banks also receive literally tonnes of much needed fresh food from local community gardening efforts in communities all around Ontario, and these efforts will only increase this year.

Since the onset of COVID-19, there has been a marked increase in demand for food gardens across Ontario as people become concerned about income loss and food shortages. People throughout the province have already invested in their seeds, and started seedlings, for this growing season. Provinces such as British Columbia¹ and Quebec² have recognized the essential role of community gardens in food provision and have allowed them to remain open with safety precautions in place.

Members of the public need to hear public health messages repeated by trusted, credible sources many times to keep following safe practices for the long duration of the COVID-19 response. Community-based agencies involved in community gardens are partners in communicating and ensuring maximum compliance with all critical public health messages.

Please support people who need safe access to healthy food by taking immediate action to clarify that community gardening is an essential food service in Ontario, so that the required planning can happen at the community and municipal level to ensure safety for individual gardeners and the broader public.

Thank you very much!

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¹ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/essential-services-covid-19>

² <https://sustainontario.com/2020/04/14/quebecs-proposed-safety-protocols-for-community-gardens/>