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## Health Coalition Demand the Ford Government Stop 2-Tier Privatization of COVID-Testing & Restore Access to Public Testing Urgently as the Pandemic's 6<sup>th</sup> Wave Gains Amplitude

Toronto – Step by step, the Ford government has been privatizing PCR testing for COVID during the pandemic, reported the Ontario Health Coalition today in a virtual press conference. Now, a new [briefing note](#) released by the Coalition reveals that the government has strictly limited public testing, forcing Ontarians to go to private for-profit chain companies and clinics or go without tests and spread the virus. At the same time, Ford is turning a blind eye to for-profit clinics charging patients for medically necessary tests. This is a violation of the core tenets of the Canada Health Act, which prohibits user fees for patients for medically needed services. It is also disastrous public health policy, forcing people to pay exorbitant charges, usually amounting to more than \$200 per test or go without, the Coalition warned.

### Key Findings:

On December 30, 2021, the Ontario government severely restricted access to PCR testing for COVID [while the province was in a surge of the Omicron variant](#). (Omicron BA.1) Since then, only those on a provincially-mandated short list of [high-risk people or those working in high-risk settings](#) are eligible for PCR testing. Even people with symptoms and those who have been exposed to the virus -- unless they fall within the narrowly drawn eligibility criteria-- are not able to access public PCR tests. This means that people cannot get publicly-delivered COVID testing through their local public hospital assessment centre or their local public health unit, even if, for eg., they have GI symptoms and may have Omicron 2 (Omicron BA.2) but cannot be sure whether it is a norovirus or Omicron, or they have children in daycare who are exhibiting symptoms and have elderly family members who are at risk.

Despite claims that the decision to strictly curtail public access to testing was due to limited capacity, at the time that the government cut access, it was doing 50,000 – 80,000 COVID tests per day. Yet the Ford government reported [the following](#) in the March 2021 Ontario Budget:

*“Laboratory-based polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing remains the gold standard in diagnostic tests and the province has the capacity to perform 105,000 tests per day. Additionally, over 90 per cent of individuals who have been tested receive test results within two days.”*

Clearly either the province has the capacity, as claimed in the budget, and is purposefully privatizing testing as a policy choice, or it does not have the capacity as claimed in the budget. In any case, as a result of the strict rationing of public PCR tests for COVID, testing has fallen to among the [lowest rates](#) we have seen since the beginning of the pandemic.

Starting in September 2020, the Ford government began [contracting for-profit pharmacies for COVID testing](#). In November 2021, the province [expanded private testing to symptomatic patients, despite concerns about health and safety](#). Step by step the privatization has expanded. Over the course of 2021 the government began to contract with an array of private for-profit companies to do the swabs, and the contents of those contracts are not public. What changed this year is the Ford government strictly curtailed public testing, forcing Ontarians to use private for-profit clinics or go without. Increasingly, the Health Coalition has been receiving accounts of patients being charged exorbitant prices for COVID tests.

To investigate, the Health Coalition called all of the private for-profit testing companies and chains we could. Coalition Interns said that they had been exposed to COVID-19, had symptoms, and were immunocompromised (thus, had clear medical necessity). The Coalition found five of the for-profit testing clinics and chains selling medically necessary

COVID tests for prices that far exceed the public price, usually more than \$200 per test. This is a violation of the Canada Health Act and the fundamental principles of Public Medicare in Canada, which forbids charging patients for medically needed services and requires those services to be provided on equal terms and conditions without financial burden for patients. Full details and results are in the Coalition's briefing note [here](#).

Throughout the pandemic, COVID-19 has been concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods, racialized communities and among essential workers in crowded working environments, yet reliable PCR testing for COVID-19 is now only available for people who can pay \$100 - \$200 or more per test. Two-tier health care worsens inequities and puts the heaviest costs on people at highest risk. Obviously, there are grave ethical and practical problems with charging patients for access to tests for an infectious and deadly disease during a global pandemic. In addition, there are serious problems with the privatization of who *delivers* the service: i.e., whether testing is provided in public assessment centres run by public hospitals and health units, or whether it is done in private for-profit clinics and chain companies. Aside from access and equity, safety issues are paramount. In public assessment centres, there are entirely separate entrances, staff in full PPE, high quality trained staff to do the swabs, and other quality and safety protections. In private clinics, staff are often in simple procedure masks and clients may be in cloth masks, both without face shields or N95 masks; in small spaces close together with elderly people waiting for other tests. There are an array of other quality, cost, health system integration and safety issues that result from laboratory privatization outlined in the Coalition's briefing note.

#### **Quotes:**

"To privatize vital public health services in the midst of a pandemic is appalling," said Natalie Mehra, executive director of the Ontario Health Coalition. "Fundamentally, it is about equity and access to needed care. It is a violation of our core principles to cut off public access then push patients to private for-profit clinics and charge them hundreds of dollars per test for diagnostic testing. It must stop immediately."

Dr. Gordon Guyatt, professor at McMaster and board member of the Ontario Health Coalition warned that the cut to public testing, "Leaves people who are exposed or who have been exposed at risk of severe and long-term illness." He went on to challenge the claims that there are not public resources, saying, "The resources are there to do testing publicly, if the government chose to use them."

"Equal access to healthcare is a fundamental right. Allowing some people to access PCR testing for a fee is unequal and unacceptable. It's just wrong when you can buy access to health care services and buy the right to live," added Cathryn Hoy, president of the Ontario Nurses' Association.

Noting that there are significant quality differences between public lab PCR tests and RAT tests and point-of-care tests, Sara Labelle, a medical laboratory technologist who has been running COVID tests in a public hospital lab throughout the pandemic and is chair of the Hospital Professionals Division at OPSEU sounded the alarm: "The people that are getting sick, don't have access to the tests... it is a crisis and our government needs to address this. Not tracking how many people actually have COVID is a public health disaster and it means more people are going to get sick with COVID."

The Ontario Health Coalition called on the Ford government to immediately restore public testing for COVID-19 along with contact tracing and isolation to mitigate the spread of the virus. Further, the Coalition called on Ford to stop the privatization of the delivery of COVID tests and to immediately stop the two-tier sale of medically needed COVID tests.

The video of the press conference is available [here](#).