



# Family Alliance Ontario

*Representing people with disabilities, their families, and their friends*

May 19, 2020

Dr. David Williams  
Chief Medical Officer  
21<sup>st</sup> Floor, 393 University Ave,  
Toronto, ONM5G 2M2

## **OPEN LETTER RE: Essential Support Person(s) for People with Disabilities**

Families and disability organizations across Ontario are raising the urgent need for an updated provincial directive for a clear and consistent provincial policy to ensure that people with disabilities have the presence of a family member, friend, or trusted support worker to provide essential support in care settings, in accordance with the Government of Canada COVID-19 Guidance document May 7, 2020. [shorturl.at/nrxFR](https://shorturl.at/nrxFR)

Hospitals and other care settings have enacted your strong recommendations of March 19<sup>th</sup> and placed a variety of restrictions on patient visitors as virus prevention measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. These restrictions, which are discretionary in nature, have been a substantial source of fear for the disability community. Many people with disabilities require the presence of essential support person(s) in order to equitably access appropriate, safe and optimal health care services. Our community worries this fear is causing people not to seek health care.

People with a variety of psychosocial or physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, communication barriers, and atypical behaviour will often require the presence of someone else to provide the accommodations necessary to act as a partner in care. They can reduce anxiety, support patient safety and, enable communication and health care decision-making, leading to better physical and mental health outcomes.

While we understand the need for restrictive visitation policies during this pandemic, there is a significant difference between a visitor and an essential support person. This is not a matter of treating people with disabilities differently; it is actually a matter of treating people with disabilities the same; ensuring their rights for equitable access to appropriate health care.

When most people, without a disability, go into hospital they are easily able to effectively communicate decisions and needs. Many people with disabilities need support to do the same.

c/o Durham Family Network

20 - 850 King Street West Oshawa, Ontario L1J 8N5

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Health care providers are working tirelessly under extraordinarily challenging circumstances. We hear from them having the extra help provided by essential support people is beneficial. They too deserve the support and guidance that a clear provincial policy can provide.

A spokesman for Christine Elliott, the Minister of Health said, “she expects Ontario hospitals to “act reasonably” to support patients during this unprecedented crisis.” However, this is not consistently happening: we continue to learn of situations where people with disabilities have been denied their essential support person(s) or have had to advocate at various levels for this crucial support. This patchwork approach is creating unnecessary barriers for people with disabilities and their families during an already frightening and potentially life-threatening time.

Ontario families and disability organizations across Ontario are requesting an updated recommendation, in accordance with the Government of Canada Guidance document of May 9, 2020. This will allow for clear and consistent policy to ensure equal access to care for individuals with disabilities, and to reduce the short-and long-term impacts of trauma related to the pandemic response. We recommend that:

1. People with disabilities have the support of a family member, friend, or trusted support worker present when accessing critical/acute care services, including emergency services and related admissions.
2. Children and adults with disabilities in long-term care/retirement homes, group homes and other congregate living facilities have access to a family member, friend or trusted support worker, where the absence of those supports will threaten the mental or physical health of the individual.

Thanking you in advance for your prompt consideration of this request and we look forward to hearing from you regarding this important and urgent concern for people with disabilities and their families.

Sincerely,



President  
Family Alliance Ontario

cc: Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health,  
Renu Mandhane, Chief Commissioner Ontario Human Rights Commission  
Hon. Doug Ford, Premier  
Hon. Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier, Minister of Health  
Hon. Merrilee Fullerton, Minister of Long-Term Care

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Hon. Todd Smith, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services  
Hon. Michael Tibollo, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions  
Hon. Raymond Cho, Minister of Seniors and Accessibility  
Jeremy Roberts, Parliamentary Assistant to Todd Smith  
Andrea Horwath, Opposition Leader  
France Gelinias, Critic for Health  
Teresa Armstrong, Critic for Home Care and Long-Term Care  
Joel Harden, Critic for Accessibility and Persons with Disabilities, Seniors  
Lisa Gretzky, Critic for Children, Community and Social Services  
Monique Taylor, Critic for Children and Youth Services

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