



Monday, April 19, 2021.

Statement RE: Government of Ontario's COVID-19 Response

Like many Ontarians, we have been watching in shock and alarm over the past few days as the Government of Ontario has attempted to respond to the third wave of rising COVID-19 cases in the province by announcing tighter restrictions. On Friday, April 16, the COVID-19 Science Advisory Table released modelling that showed that the third wave will only worsen if stronger action is not taken to support essential workers and high-risk communities. For months now, medical experts have advocated for legislated paid sick leave for all workers who are deemed "essential" and who cannot stay home. Only hours later, the provincial government held a press conference announcing tighter restrictions, including the closing of playgrounds and public spaces and empowering police officers to stop and question anyone on where they live and why they're not in their homes.

Glaringly absent from this announcement were measures that medical experts have called for since the beginning of the pandemic, such as paid sick leave. The government later walked back some of these announcements, but police are still empowered to stop people at their discretion, and the social supports that are desperately needed for students and workers in this province are still nowhere to be seen. As recent as today, the Progressive Conservative caucus withheld unanimous consent to opposition motions that would immediately implement paid sick leave and paid time off for vaccination, cancel the extraordinary police powers, shut down non-essential workplaces, and give increased financial support to local businesses and workers affected by restrictions.

It is clear to the UTSU that government inaction and unscientific policy-making seriously impacts the students we represent. Our members include students working at grocery stores and retail stores without access to paid sick leave or priority vaccinations. They include BIPOC and 2SLGBTQ+ students who are dangerously affected by expanded police powers. Many of these students have lost their jobs, and since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UTSU's Student Aid Program has become inundated with profound statements of need.

More recently, many students have also been trying to help their loved ones navigate a needlessly complicated vaccine rollout. Students are struggling to pay full tuition fees for an online-only learning experience amidst a worsening public health crisis. Lives are being lost to poor policy decisions, and the Government of Ontario must immediately change course.

The University of Toronto Students' Union, representing 38,000 full-time undergraduate students at the U of T - St. George campus, is calling on the Government of Ontario to immediately implement the following measures:

- Legislate ten (10) days of paid sick leave by passing Bill 247, the *Paid Personal Emergency Leave Now Act*.
- Amend the eligibility criteria for COVID-19 vaccines to include all workers deemed "essential" in the Province of Ontario, who cannot stay home.



- Mandate paid time off to people going to their vaccine appointments.
- Create a residential rent relief program to assist residential tenants who are struggling to pay rent during the COVID-19 pandemic, and immediately suspend all evictions proceedings of the Landlord & Tenant Board.
- Reverse broadened powers granted to police officers under emergency regulations and stop empowering police officers to stop and question people at their discretion.
- Immediately close all non-essential workplaces, and work with the Government of Canada to provide financial support for non-essential workers.
- Provide increased financial support for local businesses and workers affected by restrictions and closures.
- Streamline communications, processes, and booking systems surrounding vaccine rollout, and invest in community outreach to ensure every Ontarian knows when, where, and how they will get the vaccine.
- Invest in financial support for post-secondary students, such as through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), and direct, needs-based grants to students ineligible for OSAP, such as international students.
- Pause all student loan payments, suspend interest accrual on student loans, and lobby the Government of Canada to do the same.
- Freeze international and domestic tuition fees for the 2021-2022 academic year, and increase operating grant funding for post-secondary institutions to offset lost revenue.

The UTSU Executive Committee will be lobbying the provincial government to implement these measures, and we encourage students to do the same. You can find a list of all Members of Provincial Parliament at <https://www.ola.org/en/members/current>. You can also contact the Premier of Ontario directly by calling the Premier's Office at (416) 325-1941 or by emailing him at premier@ontario.ca. Take the time to contact your representatives and tell them why it's important to enact these measures. The government needs to hear from you.

We also recognize that this is an incredibly difficult time for students, particularly as we wrap up finals season. If you need support, we want to help connect you to it. Students can find more information on essential programs and services below:

- Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB):
<https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/benefits/recovery-sickness-benefit.html>
- Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB):
<https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/benefits/recovery-benefit.html>



- UTSU Student Aid Program, including the UTSU Emergency Bursary:
<https://www.utsu.ca/financial-assistance/>.
- U of T's Emergency Assistance Grants / COVID-19 Emergency Undergraduate Grant:
<https://future.utoronto.ca/finances/financial-aid/emergency-assistance-grants/>.
- U of T Emergency Food Bank:
<https://utfoodbank.tech/>.
- UTSU on-campus and off-campus Mental Health Directory:
<https://www.utsu.ca/mental-health-directory/>.

We know that this is a challenging time for all members of the University of Toronto community. The resilience shown by students during these uncertain times has been nothing short of inspiring, and we appreciate everyone's continued efforts to keep our communities safe. We would also like to extend our deepest gratitude to members of the University of Toronto community who have been on the frontlines of pandemic response.

Yours in service,

The University of Toronto Students' Union Executive Committee

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