



News Release

For Immediate Release

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Public Health Ontario Challenged by Lack of Clear Roles, Consultation on Key Decisions and Co-ordination on Priority Research Projects

(TORONTO) Public Health Ontario (PHO) struggles with inefficiencies at its labs and poor co-ordination of public health research, limiting its ability to deliver on its mandate, Acting Auditor General Nick Stavropoulos said today.

“Without clear roles and responsibilities, Public Health Ontario is challenged to effectively protect and improve the health of Ontarians — through surveillance of diseases, detection of health threats and providing scientific and technical advice,” said Stavropoulos.

The audit found that PHO was not taking the lead in performing or co-ordinating testing for the surveillance of some diseases, such as latent tuberculosis and wastewater testing for the detection of COVID-19. In addition, PHO was not consulted about key public health decisions, including increasing Ontarians’ access to alcohol and gambling.

PHO does not have a formal process to co-ordinate public health research with the Ministry of Health, public health units and other potential partners, which may result in duplication of efforts and lost opportunities for collaboration.

Our audit also found that three of 11 PHO lab sites perform tests on only 9 to 20 per cent of samples and specimens they receive, and transfer the rest to other sites. Plans for making lab operations more efficient to find savings and to focus on certain lab tests began in 2017, but decisions to finalize these plans have been stalled for six years. Ontarians rely on these labs to perform tests for diseases such as HIV, syphilis, tuberculosis, influenza, COVID-19 and West Nile virus.

Since 2019/20, PHO has received limited increases in base funding, and some base funding has been replaced by one-time annual funding, which is not guaranteed from year to year.

“As a key component of Ontario’s public health system, it’s important to ensure that Public Health Ontario’s expertise is leveraged to strengthen the public health system, support research and improve Ontario’s preparedness for future health emergencies,” said Stavropoulos.

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