November 11, 2015

Hon. Navdeep Bains
Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario  K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Bains:

Re: Reinstatement of the Mandatory Long-Form Census Questionnaire

On behalf of member Medical Officers of Health, Boards of Health and Affiliate organizations of the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA), I am writing today to congratulate your Government on taking swift action to restore the mandatory long-form questionnaire in time for the 2016 Canadian Census.

As you are aware, the voluntary National Household Survey (NHS) replaced Canada’s Mandatory Long-Form Census in 2010. We expressed significant concerns about this decision at the time, chief among them being the foreseeable compromise of previously reliable data due to potentially low response rates both overall and within selected populations. With the release of the results of the 2011 NHS, these concerns were validated. alPHA therefore passed a 2014 Resolution (attached) calling for access to supplementary data sets to mitigate some of the damage.

Our members count on reliable information about populations both large and small in order to do effective population health planning at the local level. We strongly objected to the decision to replace the mandatory long-form census when it was made, and called on the previous Government to reinstate it once it became clear that our ability to do proper population health planning in our communities was compromised.

Non-response and non-representative population samples created significant bias in the data generated by the NHS, producing an unreliability that magnified as they were applied to small areas and smaller populations. This was exacerbated where identifiable populations (e.g. aboriginal, immigrants, low education, low income etc.) were not properly characterized and accounted for in the results. This bias made it difficult if not impossible to compare estimates with previous census data or other sources.
We were therefore very pleased to learn that a clear pledge to immediately reinstate the mandatory long-form questionnaire was made in the Liberal Party’s election platform, and are delighted that this was indeed one of the first acts carried out by the Liberal Party as Her Majesty’s Government.

We are exceedingly thankful that you have taken the necessary steps to ensure that we don’t lose another five years of trustworthy data by reinstating the mandatory long-form questionnaire in time for the 2016 census, and we look forward to working with Statistics Canada and the Federal Government to use these data to contribute to the improvement of health and wellbeing for all Canadians.

Sincerely,

Lorne Coe,
alPHa President

COPY:  Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada
        Wayne Smith, Chief Statistician of Canada
        Hon. Eric Hoskins, Minister of Health and Long Term Care (Ontario)
        Dr. Peter Donnelly, Interim CEO, Public Health Ontario
        Pegeen Walsh, Executive Director, Ontario Public Health Association
        Gillian Alton, President, Association of Public Health Epidemiologists in Ontario
        Rona Ambrose, Interim Leader, Conservative Party of Canada
        Tom Mulcair, Leader, New Democratic Party of Canada

Encl.

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) is a non-profit organization that provides leadership to Ontario’s boards of health and public health units. The Association works with governments and other health organizations, to advocate for a strong and effective public health system in the province, as well as public health policies, programs and services that benefit all Ontarians.
TITLE: Request for Provision of Population Data from Administrative Sources and Changes in Practice Related to the National Household Survey

SPONSOR: Association of Public Health Epidemiologists in Ontario (APHEO)

WHEREAS the National Household Survey (NHS) is intended to provide data for small geographic areas and small population groups; and
WHEREAS the 2011 NHS was conducted as a voluntary national population survey; and
WHEREAS non-response to the NHS has increased compared to the mandatory long form Census as result of the voluntary nature of the survey; and
WHEREAS Statistics Canada supports the general reliability of the data at the national, provincial, territorial levels; and
WHEREAS despite this support, Statistics Canada has identified possible effects of non-response in aboriginal identity, ethnic origin, education, income, mobility, language, and housing; and
WHEREAS the risk of bias of such measures increases for small areas and smaller populations, the groups for which the NHS is intended to provide estimates; and
WHEREAS the NHS surveys a different population than the long form census did: those living in communal settings and abroad are excluded; and
WHEREAS the possible bias due to non-response and the change in population has made it difficult if not impossible to compare measures such as income with previous censuses or other sources; and
WHEREAS no alternate information sources are readily available to inform decisions or validate NHS estimates based on aboriginal identity, ethnic origin, education, income, mobility, language, and housing at the health unit level; and
WHEREAS supplemental data such as those derived from the annual tax file provided by the Canada Revenue Agency or citizenship and immigration statistics from Citizenship and Immigration Canada are available under the Data Liberation Initiative; and
WHEREAS only institutional networks of Canadian postsecondary institutions participating in the Data Liberation Initiative currently have access to such data;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Association of Local Public Health Agencies request Statistics Canada to make available and/or expedite access to supplemental information or their derivative products in the areas aboriginal identity, ethnic origin, education, income, mobility, language, and housing to support decision makers in small areas and smaller populations. This request will be copied to the Prime Minister’s office, Minister of Industry (as the originator of the Order in Council that altered the census), the Minister of Health, and the leaders of the opposition parties and their critics for these two ministries;
AND FURTHER that Statistics Canada and those who may influence decisions made by Statistics Canada be asked to reinstate a mandatory long form census and otherwise gather and make available information from administrative databases such data that may be influenced by non-response to the NHS at a small area or small population level;

AND FURTHER that the Association of Local Public Health Agencies encourage other stakeholder agencies such as the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, Public Health Ontario, Ontario Public Health Association, etc. to support this resolution.

ACTION FROM CONFERENCE: Resolution CARRIED