

PHM CANADA DECLARATION ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC. MARCH 2020.

In these unprecedented times, members of People's Health Movement Canada from across Turtle Island came together to reflect on what health justice looks like during the COVID-19 pandemic. We mourn the suffering and immense loss caused by the outbreak, and we hold in honour our allies and colleagues, in China, Italy, Iran, and elsewhere who have been responding, tirelessly and with grace, to the upheaval in their communities. We are encouraged by the social solidarity that has blossomed as communities come together in mutual aid networks, sharing resources and supporting each other in tangible ways. We have read statements and articles emerging from other PHM chapters worldwide, and in the spirit of sharing our experiences and our vision as we prepare for our surge of the pandemic, we too offer these thoughts to the network at large.

In Canada, the first case of COVID-19 was [reported in January 2020](#). Since then, the epidemic curve has risen gradually, [hitting the exponential phase](#) with established local transmission since mid-March 2020. The pandemic now affects almost all jurisdictions in Canada. All provinces have declared states of emergency or of public health emergency. While epidemiological preparation and clinical infrastructure in Canada has so far been adequate, the underlying social, political and economic dynamics of our society give us cause for worry.

We know that this crisis, and the response to it, will not affect all people equally. The current pandemic is unfolding upon unjust structures that have plagued our society for decades or centuries. Most obvious in Canada is the ongoing colonial violence that Indigenous people have confronted over centuries, most recently demonstrated by the Wet'suwet'en Nation's struggle against a destructive large-scale fracking project, [facing state-sponsored criminalization](#) for their defense of the environment. State violence also takes the form of criminal neglect leaving many Indigenous people in overcrowded or precarious housing and without access to clean water. This lack of infrastructure and services predisposes Indigenous people to a disproportionate burden of suffering in any health crisis, including the COVID-19 outbreak.

As a network of people committed to health justice, we applaud the community solidarity and mutual aid efforts that are emerging in communities across Canada, with neighbours supporting one another with grocery runs, babysitting duties, and virtual sing-a-longs through this period. While these demonstrations give us hope for the collective solidarity that will emerge from the crisis, we are concerned that individual acts of kindness are being required to fill gaping holes that are the [result of decades of underfunding and dismantling of welfare systems by the state](#), [creating crisis levels of social and wealth inequality](#). A one-time massive injection of money cannot fix this chronic structural disinvestment. [Basic incomes being deposited into individual accounts alone cannot be a substitute](#) for investing in rebuilding robust social welfare systems, including affordable housing. Furthermore, while Canada's bailout package provides support to some workers and businesses during the

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crisis, many precarious workers, such as migrant workers, gig workers, and students, are excluded from these provisions.

We also know that health has no borders. While limiting non-essential travel can be part of good physical distancing practice, we condemn Canada's decisions to further police the Canadian border and [to deny entry to migrants](#). As a wealthy, powerful country that benefits from the global order, Canada has a duty to open the borders to migrants, not only because [crises of global displacement have not stopped](#), but also because [people in refugee camps are highly vulnerable to COVID-19 with little water, space, or access to care](#). Moreover, we are concerned about [the fate of 1.5 million non-permanent residents](#) of Canada who, as a result of the decision to only allow citizens and permanent residents into Canada, may be separated from their families, home, employment, and government supports during the crisis. We note in particular the xenophobic hypocrisy in Canada's closure of the border, and subsequent backtracking to [remain open for temporary migrant agricultural workers](#), who are the most exploited workers in the country. Finally, according to the World Health Organization, there is [no good public health reason to impose this border closure](#), and in fact, funneling resources to increased border policing may detract from more effective interventions to limit propagation, such as ensuring paid sick leave and housing for all.

As a network dedicated to working for health justice, we hope that we, together with countless comrades worldwide, can transform not only the response to the pandemic, but the future that will emerge from this crisis. Despite the need for physical distancing, we can build social solidarity to not only respond to current needs in a just and equitable manner, but to also build a future that protects health for all, especially those who have borne the costs of marginalisation and dispossession for so long.

In the immediate future, we ask our friends to endorse demands you may see in your communities to expand the capacity of health and social systems to respond to the pandemic. Flattening the curve is not sufficient if we do not also reinvest in public healthcare, as [Spain](#) and [Ireland](#) have already shown it necessary to renationalise the health service, not only to absorb the impact of the pandemic, but also to sustain our society into the future. We ask that accessible options for childcare be supported so that parents may continue to work, especially for those who will be staffing essential services at this time. We echo the call of many others for paid sick leave and paid caregiving leave to be established across Canada. We caution against the punitive enforcement of distancing measures that [further imperil the health needs of the homeless and the racialised-through criminalisation](#). Finally, we encourage people to be vigilant about the response to the economic fallout: not a bailout for big banks and corporations [as Canada is already planning with the fossil fuel industry](#), but provide true public investment in households, health systems, and community welfare.

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But we also urge our friends to learn from communities and campaigns who have been fighting for justice since long before the pandemic, so that suspending debt payments, stopping evictions, and halting deportations have become a real possibility in Canada today. We ask you to support campaigns that are demanding free transit, homes for all, and an end to the carceral society. This is a propitious moment to reimagine the meaning of waged work and whose labour is valued, to shift towards an economy based on care rather than profit. In this time, we also have the opportunity to learn to address the climate crisis by resetting our relationship with the ecosystems that support us.

As members of People's Health Movement Canada, we grieve for all the suffering this pandemic is generating. We also stand together resolutely in demanding that those who need care now more than ever receive it unconditionally, not only for the virus but for all the injustices that have plagued our societies for so long. Advances we make during this time to care for each other and the environment must continue as the new normal when we emerge from the pandemic. We keep at the core of our actions our vision of the world we want to build in the future, defined by the well-being of people rather than the swings of the stock market. Though physical distance may separate us for now, we hope we can continue to work together into a future of health justice for all.