

12. The Municipalities' Funding Dilemma

In fairness to Ontario's municipalities it must be pointed out that the problems of public health funding are not restricted to those few municipalities who disrespect their legal obligations. All municipalities are affected by the underlying difficulty of funding any provincial programme from the local municipal property tax base. SARS and West Nile showed that infectious disease protection has to be approached at a provincial level. It is anomalous to fund a provincial programme like infectious disease control from the limited municipal tax base. As the Association of Municipalities of Ontario pointed out to the Commission:

Clearly SARS, as with any epidemic, has demonstrated the need for a provincial public health leadership and financing mandate to tackle global threats. Municipalities simply do not have the capacity, resources or the mandate to tackle them and should not be left vulnerable to public criticism because of this . . .

The impact and speed at which SARS and West Nile virus spread across jurisdictions points to the vulnerability of the current structures, responsibility, authority and responsiveness of the system – both from a policy perspective and certainly the inappropriateness of subsidizing provincial health programmes by the property tax base. We may have another epidemic or pandemic to deal with in the near future, so the question is, are we better prepared than we were at the onset of SARS or West Nile virus? From the municipal perspective, there is still a significant vulnerability if there is no timely provincial policy responsibility and if financing of the public health base still rests on the property tax base. Managing such crises as SARS not only impacts public health services, it impacts other service areas as well from police, to fire, to ambulance, our communication systems and other services.

The capacity of the current structure and how it is financed in order to respond to a serious situation is disconcerting. AMO firmly believes that the time is now for the province and municipal government to develop a plan that begins to better reflect the capacity and ability to pay when it

comes to community health matters. We believe that this plan should start with infectious diseases and that if the province fully assumes this function, then we need to sit together to examine the structure and process for getting there while managing the rest of the public health portfolio.

Underlying the regrettable story just told are the basic systemic flaws pointed out above by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario. The Association makes a persuasive case for the province and the municipalities to sit down together and agree on the best structure to fund infectious disease protection and the best process for getting there.