

## Supporting Ontario's diverse business community

Authored by the Ajax-Pickering Board of Trade

Co-sponsored by the Whitby Chamber of Commerce

### Issue

Following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, many small business owners across Ontario began to pivot their business models, including adopting new safety measures and shifting to online sales platforms. While this massive shift has challenged Ontario's entire small business community, it has taken an additional toll on the many small business owners in Ontario who have limited English and/or French speaking skills. To support growth and diversity, the government of Ontario must ensure resources and supports are available to the whole business community.

### Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted immigrants and under-represented groups. While there is no requirement to collect race-based data in Canada related to COVID-19, in Ontario, Census data were used to analyze the distribution of COVID cases across neighbourhoods with higher vs lower concentration of visible minorities. The findings show that the rate of COVID-19 infections were three times higher, hospitalizations rates were four times higher, and deaths were twice as high.<sup>1</sup>

Further, according to Statistics Canada, the pandemic has also had a greater impact on immigrants and visible minorities in the workforce:<sup>2</sup>

- 34% of front-line/essential service workers identify as visible minorities (compared with 21% in other sectors).
- Visible minorities are also more likely to work in industries worst affected by the pandemic, such as food and accommodation services – compounding health and economic risks.
- Impact of COVID-19 on immigrants' employment could reverse gains made in recent years to close the gap.

The Government of Ontario has offered support in the form of multilingual health sheets<sup>3</sup> and workplace safety posters<sup>4</sup>, however live support services like those provided by the toll free Stop the Spread Information Line are available only in English and French.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health Ontario. COVID-19 in Ontario – A Focus on Diversity. <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/epi/2020/06/covid-19-epi-diversity.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. Impacts on Immigrants and People Designated as Visible Minorities (October 2020). <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/2020004/s6-eng.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Public Health Ontario. Multilingual COVID-19 Factsheets. <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/diseases-and-conditions/infectious-diseases/respiratory-diseases/novel-coronavirus/public-resources?tab=6>

<sup>4</sup> Government of Ontario. Resources to prevent COVID-19 in the workplace. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/resources-prevent-covid-19-workplace#section-3>

Programs developed to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 and move businesses to an online platform, such as Digital Main St., rely on business owners' ability to have English or French verbal and oral communication skills.

The lack of multilingual supports could result in non-English and non-French speaking business owners being put at a digital, economic, and safety disadvantage.

As Ontario looks towards recovery, the Ontario Government should ensure that tools are in place to help the entire business community thrive.

### **Recommendations**

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Ontario Government to:

1. Encourage immigrants and non-English and non-French speaking business owners to fully participate in the local and provincial economy by offering pandemic grants to improve on language skills, and actively market that offering.
2. Ensure that pandemic resources, including live support workers, are available in a variety of languages, based on provincial demographics and need.