

## MEMORANDUM

To: Members of Committee of the Whole

From: Katherine Chislett  
Commissioner of Community and Health Services

Date: May 1, 2020

Re: Update on Social Service Response to COVID-19 Global Pandemic

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This memorandum provides an update to the Social Service Response report brought forward to Committee on [April 16, 2020](#). It also includes information from Paramedic and Seniors Services not otherwise included in regular updates to Council by the Medical Officer of Health.

### **Council received information and provided direction on York Region's social service response to COVID-19 at the April meeting of the Committee of the Whole**

The report provided information on immediate and emerging needs of vulnerable populations due to the pandemic. [Federal](#) and [provincial](#) supports were highlighted, as were Regional actions, short term plans and new partnerships to respond to COVID-19 needs. Council authorized the Regional Chairman and the Commissioner, Community and Health Services to direct new federal, provincial or external funds towards eligible priority initiatives. Council also authorized the review and adjustment of Community Investment funded-projects in 2020 to maximize available funding.

### **Financial assistance and food security continue to be among top issues facing vulnerable populations in York Region**

Based on data from Access York and 211FindHelp, supported by insights from the Region's various networks, financial assistance and food security remain high priorities in the community. In April, financial assistance made up more than a third of all Access York calls (2,666 or 35% of inquiries by April 21). The top need category at 211FindHelp was food (132 related calls or 22%) followed by financial assistance (91 related calls or 15%).

## **The needs of those living and working in congregate settings have become more pronounced**

The safety and health of vulnerable populations in congregate living settings (including long-term care facilities, shelters, group homes and other supportive living settings) and the workers caring for them has also become a key issue. Access to, and information on, how to properly use personal protective equipment along with staffing resources, are top needs across these settings. Within supportive housing and shelters, challenges include availability of space to practice physical distancing, activities that allow people to remain on site, and access to food, clothing and showers.

## **The Federal and Provincial Governments continue to enact new measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and evolving community needs**

In addition to those summarized in the [April 2020](#) report to Council, the federal and provincial governments have committed to a range of new and expanded financial and social supports, including:

### **Federal Actions**

- Expanded access to the [Canada Emergency Response Benefit](#) for workers who lose their income as a result of the pandemic. Workers who are still employed, but are not receiving income because of disruptions to their work situation due to COVID-19, now qualify for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. The federal government has also announced it will work with provinces and territories to top up salaries of low-income workers deemed essential in the fight against COVID-19
- Announced the [Canada Emergency Student Benefit](#) income support for post-secondary students who will experience financial hardship over the summer. The benefit would provide \$1,250 per month for eligible students from May through August 2020, and \$1,750 for students with dependents and those with permanent disabilities. The benefit is part of a suite of initiatives to support [students and recent graduates](#), including \$154 million for youth employment and skills development, \$80 million for student work placements and plans to change the Canada Student Loan Program in 2020 to 2021 to allow more students to qualify for supports and be eligible for greater amounts
- Unveiled the \$350 million-[Emergency Community Support Fund](#), which would flow through national charities, to local charitable and non-profit organizations that serve vulnerable populations. Funding would support delivery of essential services, including enhancements to volunteer-based home deliveries of groceries and medications and providing transportation services, like accompanying or driving seniors or persons with disabilities to appointments

## Provincial Actions

- Announced an \$11 million partnership with the [Ontario Community Support Program](#), which will expand Meals on Wheels services to deliver meals, medicines and other essential items to those in need, particularly low-income seniors and people with disabilities and chronic medical conditions
- Expanded the list of essential workers eligible to receive emergency child care on [April 17, 2020](#), to include people who assist vulnerable communities, including staff working in shelters, developmental services, victim services, violence against women services, and children's residential settings; the eligibility list was expanded again on [April 29, 2020](#), to include people who work in the food supply chain, retirement homes, grocery stores and pharmacies, and certain federal employees, including the military
- Implemented a [COVID-19 Action Plan for Protecting Long-Term Care Homes](#) to help stop and contain the spread of COVID-19 in the province's long-term care homes. The plan introduced more aggressive testing, screening and surveillance, deployed specialized teams from hospitals, public health and the home care sector, recruited additional frontline staff and increased personal protective equipment
- Adopted [temporary emergency measures](#) to support healthier and safer staffing arrangements for those who serve vulnerable populations; these measures include restricting retirement home employees from working in more than one site and providing Local Health Integration Networks the ability to reassign frontline staff to care facilities where they are most needed
- Partnered with [Feed Ontario](#) and other funders to provide emergency food to communities in need across Ontario. Feed Ontario will use the \$8 million in providing funding to purchase hampers of non-perishable food for distribution by local food banks
- Announced the [COVID-19 Action Plan: Protecting Vulnerable Ontarians](#) to better protect those living in high risk settings, including group homes and shelters. The plan builds on previously-announced measures and includes screening and testing for staff and residents at these sites, and provision of personal protective equipment supplies and training
- Announced [pandemic pay for frontline workers](#) in recognition of the dedication, long hours and increased risk of working to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. The increase will provide four dollars per hour worked on top of existing hourly wages. In addition, employees working over 100 hours per month would receive lump sum payments of \$250 per month for each of the next four months. Staff are awaiting the direction and details from the province on who exactly is eligible and how the program is to be implemented
- Doubled the [Guaranteed Annual Income System \(GAINS\)](#) for low-income seniors for six months starting in April 2020. Individuals will receive up to \$166 per month and couples will receive up to \$332 per month. These payments will provide an additional \$75 million

to 194,000 vulnerable seniors who may need more help to cover essential expenses during the COVID-19 pandemic. This action was pending in the April report

Regional staff will continue to track federal and provincial announcements and share information with Council and the broader community through regular updates, newsletters and the Region's website.

### **York Region continues to complement Federal and Provincial social services actions and implement creative measures to respond to needs of vulnerable residents**

Regional staff continues to adapt and deliver programs and services to complement other government initiatives that address social service needs, including:

#### **Enhanced Housing and Homelessness Supports**

- Implemented short-term rent benefit program for market rent households living in community housing who have lost employment income as a result of COVID-19
- Initiated wellness checks with seniors living in community housing to ensure they are safe, and have the help and supports that they need
- Developed resources to support housing tenants and members to navigate and apply for COVID-19 related income benefits and supports
- Provided additional funding as well as training to Housing with Support providers to support the care of vulnerable residents and additional costs as a result of COVID-19 including enriched in-home activities
- Extended York Region's two seasonal shelters into May to ensure a safe place to stay for those experiencing homelessness during this pandemic
- Established a transitional isolation shelter in the Township of King for those experiencing homelessness to safely self-isolate and transition into more stable housing while receiving supportive programming, such as goal setting, counselling and family reunification. This includes temporary shelter for individuals who need assistance after the two seasonal shelters close

#### **Innovative Children's Services**

- Opened a fourth emergency child care centre for essential healthcare and other frontline workers (as of April 27, 2020)
- Provided support to emergency child care centre staff to help children with special needs as well as others who are struggling in these unfamiliar settings
- Posted a comprehensive list of parenting and child development resources on the Region's website and shared with EarlyON providers

- Developed new collaboration with EarlyON providers that virtually connects isolated families with the Region's Early Interventionists to answer questions parents have about their child's development
- Expanded supports for families of children with special needs to include virtual visits, allowing staff to see more clients and provide parents with support and strategies to help their children, with close to 100 video visits in the first week
- Launched online learning sessions for early learning and child care professionals for professional development. May registration was full within hours

### **Escalated Social Assistance and Income Supports**

- Provided additional discretionary benefits to eligible Ontario Works customers. Additional discretionary benefits in March and April are 100% funded by the Province
- Quickly processed applications for Emergency Assistance for people in need who are not receiving financial help through social assistance
- Continued to work closely with Ontario Works customers to ensure they are getting access to all appropriate financial supports to stay healthy and housed such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit

### **Making it easier to get help**

- Expanded Access York service to 7 days a week, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., to ensure residents have the information they need, when they need it
- Added community resources for vulnerable residents to [york.ca/covid19](https://york.ca/covid19) including those experiencing domestic violence, homelessness or financial hardship, newcomers and people with disabilities, and resources for people who want to help

### **Region continues to leverage collaborative relationship with United Way Greater Toronto and other community partners**

The community coordination initiative co-hosted with United Way Greater Toronto announced in the April Council report continues to progress. Partnership tables (called "cluster response tables") are addressing community-identified issues related to homelessness and access to food. Since the April report, a third and fourth table have been mobilized, one to address issues experienced by isolated, high-risk seniors and the other to help coordinate the efforts of service providers delivering the full spectrum of human services across the Region. Organizations that have approached the Region for assistance have since joined the coordination initiative and are engaged in collaborative discussions with the Region and other agencies. [Membership of the four partnership tables](#) continues to evolve to best respond to changing community needs.

The following priority issues have been identified, which the partnership tables are actively tackling:

- Homelessness: Ability to safely accept new intakes into shelter settings, staffing, need for more space while maintaining physical distancing, lack of personal protective equipment, access to technology and provision of food for unsheltered individuals
- Seniors: Seniors need access to culturally appropriate food including delivery, assistance with online services, centralized intake for services and ways to identify those isolated
- Food Access: Agencies need food to distribute to clients and grocery gift cards that clients could use to shop for themselves. Clients are requesting more prepared meals and supports with grocery pick-up and delivery

Regional staff are proactively giving guidance directly to operators as well as using the homelessness table to tackle issues in the Housing with Supports and Emergency Housing system. The table helps inform the operation of the self-isolation shelter (Leeder Place) and development and implementation of the transitional shelter in the Township of King. The weekly discussions also support information exchange, resource sharing, and dissemination of public health guidance.

The coordination initiative is also providing the Region and agencies with information, as well as opportunity to be part of discussions to inform the allocation of funding from/flowed through United Way Greater Toronto. These funding opportunities include the following, for which application process remains in progress at the time of the writing of this memo:

- United Way Local Love Fund – Funding of up to \$10,000 per agency for necessities of life, technology or equipment and staff or volunteers
- Reaching Home - Federal emergency funding of approximately \$3 million for initiatives intended to prevent and reduce homelessness
- Seniors Fund – Federal funding of \$850,000 for programs such as meals on wheels, provide culturally appropriate food

As of April 30, the United Way has announced funding under [Local Love Fund](#) for 11 local agencies to provide vital services and urgent community supports for vulnerable individuals and families in York Region. Funded projects include: providing food, warm clothing and outdoor survival items to 75 people currently experiencing homelessness; food packages to 100 newcomer/refugee families and grocery gift cards to 24 women and their children fleeing violence who are staying in hotels with kitchens so they can prepare their own food.

Through the seniors partnership table, a proposal to support vulnerable seniors having difficulty accessing technology has been developed and submitted to the United Way for funding under the Seniors Fund.

Council will receive updates on these funding initiatives in future reports.

### **Review of Community Investment-funded projects is underway and expected to enable new initiatives to support the Region's social service response**

Regional staff is working with agencies to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on projects under the \$5.6 million-Community Investment Fund. A total of 45 projects in 2020, delivered by 38 agencies, are being carefully reviewed to identify opportunities to scale up, scope down or pivot to reflect service delivery restrictions and to better support social service needs. Funding freed up through this process can also support new initiatives. Recommendations will be presented to the Regional Chairman and Commissioner, Community and Health Services for approval. The outcome of the review will be included in future report to Council. As of writing this memo, review of 22 projects have been initiated and is underway.

### **Paramedic Services' integral role in the health care system has been amplified and leveraged during the pandemic**

Although overall 911 call volume has decreased since the start of the pandemic, with March's call volume down 5% and April's down over 20% (so far, compared to 2019), the range of paramedic supports and services provided to the health care system and our communities has grown.

Community Paramedics have been engaged with community partners, the Local Health Integration Network and hospitals to deliver effective and collaborative responses to the pandemic. Some efforts have prevented unnecessary visits to the hospital through treating individuals in place while others have been part of the health care response to outbreaks.

In addition to continuing to respond to 911 calls, paramedics and the community paramedicine team have been providing additional supports during the pandemic, including:

- Supported Public Health to perform follow-up swabs of COVID-19 positive and presumptive positive residents
- Partnered with Public Health to meet anticipated increases in overdose calls due to COVID-19 by supporting calls related to emotional crisis and limited sites for Naloxone kits
- Provided mobile COVID-19 testing, education on infection prevention and control practices for Group Homes, Emergency Housing locations, Long-Term Care Homes and Retirement Homes as needed, in partnership with Public Health and Social Services
- Supported regional distribution of personal protective equipment supplies to community agencies experiencing critical shortages
- Set up a testing site, in partnership with Public Health, at Paramedic Services Headquarters to test health care workers for COVID-19 and enable timely return to work for those who test negative and are asymptomatic

- Supported seniors' care settings by conducting assessments, bloodwork and providing IV therapy as required, in conjunction with other health care providers
- York Region paramedics were among the first health care providers to respond to several of the congregate living outbreaks

### **COVID-19 significantly impacts the elderly population in long-term care homes, requiring strong response from Seniors Services including implementing “an iron ring” of preventative measures around homes**

The provincial government [released](#) updated modelling projections for COVID-19 in Ontario on April 20, 2020 and highlighted that although the community spread of the virus appears to have peaked, the virus continues to spread in long-term care homes and other congregate care settings. According to provincial data, as of April 25, 147 of Ontario's 630 long-term care homes had a COVID-19 outbreak.

The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Long-Term Care provided a series of directives, emergency orders, guidance documents and memos on a variety of preventative measures to put in place. [Provincial funding](#) in the amount of \$37,500 in March and \$37,500 in April was provided to assist long-term care homes with increased costs to prevent and contain the pandemic.

York Region's two municipally operated long-term care homes (Maple Health Centre with 100 beds and Newmarket Health Centre with 132 beds) have been proactively preparing for the potential impacts of COVID-19 since January 2020. Many preventative measures were put in place well before the province mandated them. Both Maple Health Centre and Newmarket Health Centre (Homes), which are regionally operated, quickly mobilized and implemented a pandemic response structure to plan and implement measures to protect residents and staff. Examples of measures taken include:

- Temperature taking of staff and essential visitors as part of the active screening conducted on anyone entering the Homes
- Limited staff to working for only one employer
- Ceased all group recreational activities and communal dining and provided residents with their meals in their rooms with staff assistance
- Stopped entrance by volunteers, non-essential visitors, private caregivers and companions
- Provided residents one-to-one activities with staff and used technology to connect with families and friends
- Provided attending physicians' care for residents through virtual consultations, with in person visits only when essential, to limit the risk of bringing the virus into the Homes



- Increased the supply of emergency medications in case there is an increase in demand
- Provided staff personal protective equipment upon entering the Homes, and enhanced education on infection control and proper use of personal protective equipment
- Enhanced cleaning and disinfection processes for all areas in the Homes
- Redeployed staff from the Region's Adult Day Programs to assist in the Homes. Adult Day Program staff continued to have weekly check-in calls with caregivers and clients to help identify individuals in crisis and make referrals to community supports

As of April 25, 2020, the Region's two long-term care homes have not experienced a positive case of COVID-19 in a resident or staff member

### **York Region will continue to implement actions to meet the financial, social and housing needs of people impacted by COVID-19**

York Region staff will continue to monitor community trends and needs; prioritize resources where they are needed most; leverage existing resources, partnerships and community assets; and coordinate with stakeholders to address the needs of vulnerable people during the pandemic. Council will receive regular updates on the actions and outcomes of the Region's social service response to COVID-19.

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Commissioner of Community and Health Services

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