



## MEMORANDUM

To: Members of Committee of the Whole

From: Katherine Chislett, Commissioner of Community and Health Services  
Dr. Karim Kurji, Medical Officer of Health

Date: October 6, 2020

Re: Update on Public Health Emergency Response to COVID-19 Global Pandemic

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This memorandum provides an update on the current Public Health COVID-19 response. It also highlights partner collaborations supporting response efforts and fall planning for the approaching influenza season.

### **York Region is experiencing an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases**

Overall, Ontario is seeing increasing numbers of new COVID-19 cases. Since August 2020, York Region has been experiencing an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases through workplace, institutional and community outbreaks, and a resurgence of travel cases from international destinations. There also been a slight rise in the number of hospitalizations at York Regions' three hospitals.

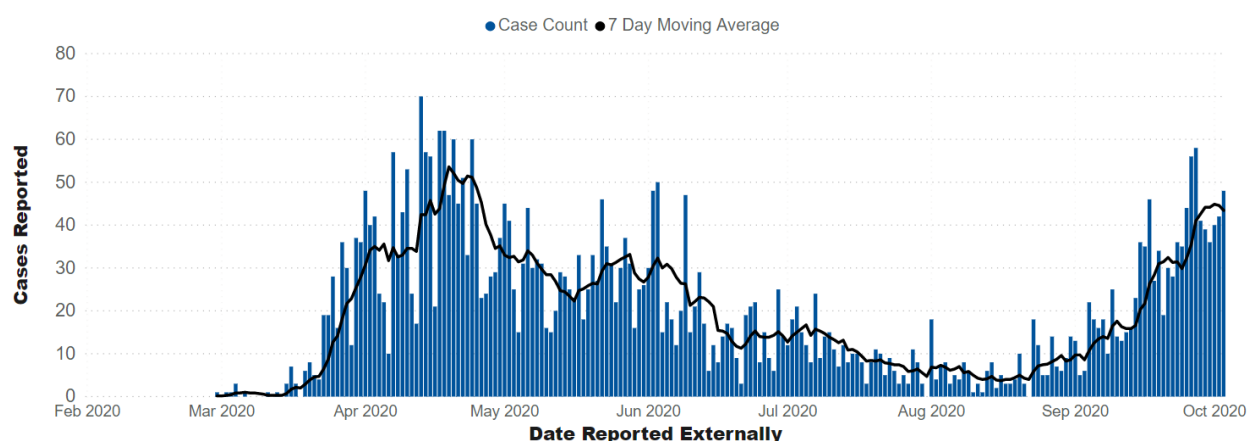
As of October 4, 2020 York Region had confirmed outbreaks in seven long-term care homes, one hospital, two community care settings, 18 workplaces, and none in child care centres and schools. In addition 25 schools which have a laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 case among staff, students or visitors were under surveillance.

The total number of confirmed outbreaks is similar to early April in York Region. However, in contrast to early April when the majority of outbreaks occurred in institutional facilities more recently 64% of outbreaks have been in the workplace. In addition, a number of community and social gathering related clusters have been investigated since the beginning of September.

The increasing trend of cases, shown in Figure 1, generally correlates to an increase in the number of large indoor and outdoor social gatherings, and household contacts of cases where the controls of physical distancing and masks may not been used.

**Figure 1**

**Case Trends since February 2020 in York Region**



Note: Date reported externally is the date the case was reported via [www.york.ca/covid19](http://www.york.ca/covid19)

The Province has taken action in response to the increasing rate of new COVID-19 cases. The [Province](#) recently amended Ontario Regulation 364/20, Rules for Areas in Stage 3, under the *Reopening Ontario (A Flexible Response to COVID-19) Act, 2020*, by reducing the number of people allowed to attend organized public events and social gatherings. These changes went into effect on September 19, 2020. The new limits applying to events and gatherings in residential and other non-business or non-organizational settings are:

- 10 people at indoor events or gatherings (previous limit of 50)
- 25 people at an outdoor events or gatherings (previous limit of 100)

Ontario Regulation 364/20 has other amendments, effective September 26, 2020, which include:

- Applying additional restrictions to restaurants, bars and food and drink establishments (including nightclubs)
- Closing all strip clubs
- Requiring businesses or organizations to comply with any advice, [recommendations](#), and instructions issued by the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health on screening for COVID-19

**To meet the changing demands of the pandemic the Province has adapted COVID-19 testing guidelines**

On September 24, 2020, the Province updated COVID-19 [testing guidelines](#), which ensure testing resources are available to individuals who are both symptomatic and asymptomatic. The guideline outlines Ontarians should only seek testing at assessment centres if they:

- Are showing COVID-19 symptoms
- Have been exposed to a confirmed case of the virus (as informed by a public health unit or have received an exposure notification through the COVID Alert app)
- Are a resident or work in a setting that has a COVID-19 outbreak (as informed by their local public health unit)

Additionally, as of September 25, 2020 Ontarians who are not showing symptoms and are eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative directed by the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Long-Term Care may be tested for COVID-19 at select Ontario [pharmacies](#).

**As the province continues to open, contact tracing has become significantly more challenging**

Data shows that large gatherings generally result in more contacts per COVID-19 positive case which is resource intensive due to the complexities of contract tracing. Table 1 presents information on the average number of contacts per case as well as the range in unique number of contacts that were identified during case investigations.

**Table 1**  
**Changes in Contact per case and unique Contacts Identified**

Date Range	Average number of contacts per Case	Total Number of Unique Contacts Identified
July 27 - August 2	1 to 4	7 to 20
August 24 - 30	4 to 6	7 to 60
September 14 - 20	3 to 6	63 to 117
September 21 - 27	3 to 6	57 to 126

Public Health continues to complete detailed investigations for each case to determine how individuals may have acquired COVID-19, where they were exposed to others while infectious, the need to self-isolate and to manage and control secondary transmission or outbreaks as they arise.

## **Staffing needs continue to be assessed to meet the needs of the COVID-19 response efforts**

With the increasing numbers in cases, the complex requirements of contact tracing and the implementation of the COVID-19 school-focused nurses program, Public Health continues to address staffing needs through:

- Continued recruitment efforts for the response, including to the COVID-19 school-focused nurse program
  - To date 105 nurses, inspectors, data analysts and other council approved roles have been hired. 131 additional full-time equivalents have yet to be filled
  - Challenges in recruitment efforts have been experienced due to competitive job markets, specific skill requirements and internal capacity to facilitate expedited recruitment processes
- Re-prioritizing public health essential services to maintain flexibility to re-deploy more staff to the response where needed. Attachment 1 outlines the re-prioritization of Public Health essential services during three phases of the COVID-19 response
- Cross training staff in areas of case management, contact tracing, outbreak management and other areas of the COVID-19 response to support surge capacity and the to be nimble to meet the operational needs of the response
- Using Public Health Ontario for daily contact monitoring for individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19
- Exploring alternate staffing supports with other public health units, for example, a Memorandum of Understanding is in place with Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington public health unit for case management support

## **Together with school boards, Public Health is supporting the return of York Region student to classrooms during COVID 19**

The new school-focused nurse program will have 50 full time nursing positions funded by the Ministry of Health. The funding has been allocated to School Nurses, Outbreak Nurses and Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC Nurses). Currently, these positions have been addressed through a combination of redeployed staff and new hires. Since some of the redeployed staff will have to return to other COVID-19 operations, external recruitment for public health nurses is ongoing. Nurses on the COVID-19 Schools Team are responsible for:

- Providing support to schools and school boards with the development and implementation of COVID-19 health and safety plans

- Providing COVID-19 related support for: infection prevention and control measures; surveillance, screening and testing requirements; case and contact and outbreak management
- Supporting communication and engagement activities with parents and local communities, as well as the broader health care sector

Since July, 2020, weekly meetings have taken place with both school boards to prepare for and manage COVID-19 cases, contacts and outbreaks, in conjunction with guidance provided through the Ministries of Education and Health.

To further support the return to school, York Region has:

- Conducted a table top exercise in partnership with York Region school boards to test notification procedures between schools, school boards and public health and identify communication strategies and processes
- Established reporting practices with schools to quickly identify when schools experience fluctuations in attendance and for reporting of illnesses
- Developed school reopening [guidance document](#) and [safety checklist](#) and additional resources for parents and staff which are available at [York.ca/safeatschool](http://York.ca/safeatschool)
- Developed decision trees for schools to help support principles on the process for dealing with symptomatic students
- Updated knowledge articles and prepared frequently asked questions resources to support inquiries through Access York and Public Health telephone lines (Health Protection Health Connection, Health Connection Surge and COVID-19 Chronic Infectious Diseases)

In addition, the new School Services intake line serves as point of contact for all schools including York Region private schools. Resources are sent to private schools as they are developed or updated and questions are answered via phone and email through the intake line.

Public Health anticipates continued COVID-19 cases in schools. Careful monitoring, assessment, case and contact management and investigation measures are put into place when [COVID-19 is detected in a school](#). In addition, York Region residents may find information about school cases, surveillance and closures through York Regions [dashboard](#) or the [Ministry of Education](#) webpage.

### **Ongoing engagement with partners ensures efficient processes for addressing the increase in number of COVID-19 cases**

Public Health continues to work with other health units and community and provincial partners to effectively coordinate efforts to address and manage the increasing number of COVID-19 cases. For example:

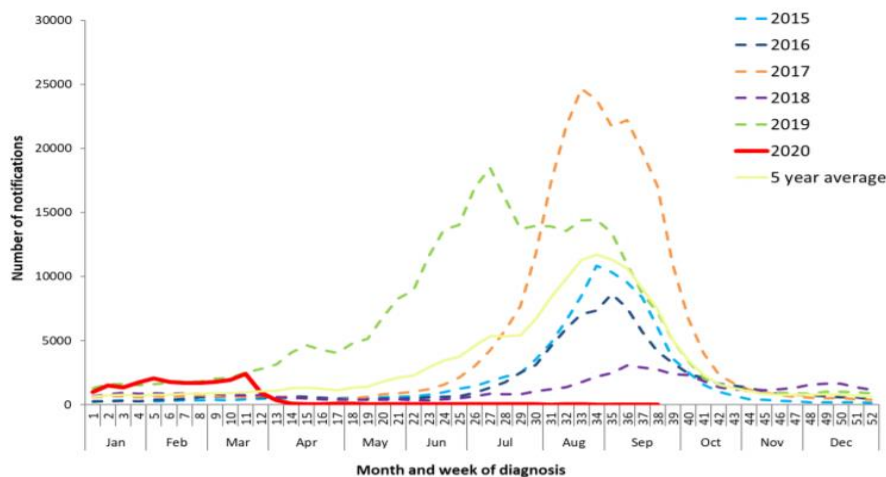
- Coordinating with York Region’s three hospitals, Paramedic Services and Ontario Health Central Region for continued mobile testing support for outbreak management
- Exploring mobile testing options for schools
- Working with business operators, neighbouring health units and provincial partners to prevent and quickly respond to COVID-19 infection in workplace settings
- Building on small successes with the new Provincial electronic case and contact management (CCM) data system to minimize manual laboratory data entry and by entering data into the new system within 24 hours of receipt to facilitate a better understanding of the COVID-19 situation provincially

Despite the implementation of the new CCM data system, Public Health has not yet been able to realize the potential efficiencies associated with CCM’s implementation. The recent influx of cases, complexity of cases, new staff to on-board, and the frequency of changes to CCM provides challenges with maximizing the use of the system. As a result, additional data entry support is being sought to ensure timely case and contact follow-up activities can be completed.

### **Planning is underway for the universal influenza immunization program and continues for COVID-19**

York Region anticipates the 2020/21 influenza (“flu”) season will look different this year due to the co-circulation of COVID-19. Like other years, the goal remains to ensure as many residents are immunized against influenza as possible. If flu immunization uptake and ongoing public health measures are as effective in York Region as they were in Australia, York Region may see a lower burden of influenza-related illnesses compared to previous seasons. On May 27, 2020, the Australian government was reporting over 7.3 million flu vaccines were administered in 2020 – up from 4.5 million doses in 2019 and 3.5 million doses in 2017. (Source: [Record Flu Vaccines in 2020 to Protect Australians](#)). Figure 2 shows the number of laboratory confirmed influenza cases in Australia from January 2015 to September 20, 2020. The red line demonstrates the impacts of increased vaccine uptake and ongoing COVID-19 public health measures.

**Figure 2**  
**Notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza in Australia\***



\* January 1, 2015 to 20 September 2020, by month and week of diagnosis

Source: [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-surveil-ozflu-flucurr.htm/\\$File/flu-12-2020.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-surveil-ozflu-flucurr.htm/$File/flu-12-2020.pdf)

York Region Public Health has been successful at obtaining a 25% increase to our influenza vaccine allocation from the Ministry of Health for the 2020 to 2021 influenza season. This includes additional doses of the quadrivalent flu vaccine (for individuals six months of age and older) as well as the high-dose trivalent vaccine (for individuals aged 65 years and older). Our allocation does not include those vaccines provided to pharmacies, as they receive the vaccine directly from Ministry of Health-contracted third-party suppliers.

York Region Public Health was the first health unit in Ontario to receive influenza vaccine and, as of September 28, 2020, began receiving and processing influenza vaccine orders. First shipments of vaccines to health care providers were distributed as of September 30, 2020.

Additionally, Public Health planning for the approaching flu season includes:

- Supporting health care providers with planning for their flu shot clinics
- Supporting outreach and flu vaccine distribution for vulnerable, high-risk and underserved populations
- Partnering with internal and external service providers to increase opportunities for flu vaccine administration
- Promoting the uptake of flu vaccine by York Region residents and health care workers
- Distributing influenza vaccine to community health care providers (pharmacies get it directly from suppliers)

- Leveraging flu shot clinics to pilot novel and innovative vaccination strategies (e.g., drive-thru clinics) in advance of a COVID-19 vaccine

## **Work to develop of a COVID-19 vaccine continues at an unprecedented rate**

Until widespread immunization is achieved the pandemic will continue with the spread of infection. The Public Health COVID-19 response will be ongoing in parallel with a mass immunization campaign until a large enough part of the population has developed immunity to the virus. As more people are immunized the response should stabilize.

As reported regularly in the media, work on a vaccine is proceeding at an unprecedented pace. Currently the most optimistic outlook is a vaccine may be available later in Q1 2021, with widespread immunization in York Region achieved later in the fall. However, much is still unknown, such as:

- The role and responsibilities public health units will have with COVID-19 mass immunization; one potential scenario is the vaccine is provided to the health units to both administer and to distribute
- If the vaccine be provided in batches and rolled out to various groups based on priority or if the vaccine will be a single dose or require multiple doses
- How the vaccine will be administered (e.g. by injection, orally or nasally), or how often an individual will need to be vaccinated (e.g. with one dose or two, one time only or annually) or how effective it will be
- What the vaccine uptake will be. Federal polls estimate approximately 70% of Canadians are positive towards receiving the vaccine

In preparation for the COVID-19 vaccine, the Province has requested public health units to provide them with vaccine requirements for immunizing each public health unit's entire population above the age of six months, over a 60 day period of time. Currently, there is no confirmation of the Province's vaccine roll out plan; however, it is unlikely that a vaccine would be rolled out to the entire province simultaneously as this would logistically be a very challenging task. Should the Region be required to immunize the entire population aged six months of age and older (approximately 1.18 million people) in 60 days, this would require administering over 20,000 doses of vaccine by operating seven 12 hour clinics seven days per week for eight weeks. Current staffing capacity and ongoing COVID-19 response requirements would be insufficient to meet this resource demand.

## **York Region continues to prepare for COVID-19 mass immunization administration and vaccine distribution**

Public health units are anticipating direction from the Province in terms of their roles and responsibilities for the administration and distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine. York Region Public Health continues to prepare for both administration and distribution through flexible approaches and different models to meet the need of residents. This influenza season will



provide the opportunity to pilot different approaches through clinic models, staffing, administration, locations and public health measures to prepare for COVID-19 immunization.

Currently, the main focus of planning is the implementation of a mass immunization specific staff scheduling system and collaborative work with internal and external partners to develop a robust but flexible infrastructure for vaccine distribution and administration.

Public health is also exploring options for client scheduling and appointment booking to minimize crowding and ensure COVID-19 precautions regarding physical distancing can be maintained in these settings.

### **York Region Public Health's 2020 COVID-19 response cost is estimated to be \$54.6 million**

Total costs for the 2020 Public Health Covid response are forecast to be \$54.6 million for 2020 and are included in the Region's overall forecasted costs. These costs include all staff costs for employees redeployed to the Public Health COVID Response, including staff performing COVID testing, Communications, IT Support, recruiting costs, and increased departmental and corporate support services, and also the cost of materials, supplies, external service providers, and masks purchased for distribution to our vulnerable population have been included in the estimated costs. Costs related to the Public Health response up to August 30, 2020 were included in the memo dated, [September 22, 2020](#) which provided an update on the Financial Impacts of COVID-19 to Council.

The total 2020 approved budget for York Region public health is \$75.0 million (gross) of which \$17.7 million is funded from the tax levy (excluding Corporate and Departmental support costs). Total estimated 2020 costs exceed the approved Public Health budget by \$20.1 million.

On March 25, 2020, the Province announced funding to support the Public Health COVID-19 Response, and on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 the Ministry of Health confirmed support for one-time extraordinary costs for Public Health and advised a process would be forthcoming. On August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Ministry of Health provided a template to Public Health Units to estimate the total cost of the Public Health COVID-19 response costs as well as to identify the costs that could be managed within the approved Public Health budget. Staff prepared and submitted the completed template on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020 in accordance with Ministry of Health instructions, identifying \$20.1 million in extra ordinary public health costs. Table 2 summarizes York Region Public Health COVID-19 financial estimates for 2020.

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Public Health COVID-19 financial estimates**

Description	Estimates (millions)
COVID-19 Related costs as of June 30, 2020	\$21.98
COVID-19 Related Costs forecast July 1 to December 31 <sup>st</sup>	\$32.67
<b>Total COVID-19 Related Costs</b>	<b>\$54.65</b>
Amount funded from within Public Health approved 2020 Budget	(\$34.54)
<b>Net expenditure claim for reimbursement from the Ministry of Health</b>	<b>\$20.10</b>

Staff is hopeful the amount exceeding the approved public health budget at year end will be funded 100% by the Province, as part of the normal year end reporting and settlement process. This is based on provincial announcements in March and April, as well as discussions with Ministry of Health staff in August and September.

### **York Region’s COVID-19 response continues to focus on protecting the public**

It is anticipated an increase in the number of cases will continue this fall and winter due to the activities of re-opening (e.g., more people back in workplaces, students back to school and attendance at gatherings) and the coinciding respiratory and influenza season. Public Health’s COVID-19 response will continue to require a flexible approach and infrastructure for shifting staff and resources to manage the response and providing essential services to protect the public through effective and reliable public health measures.

York Region remains committed to transparency and working together with schools, school boards, students and parents. In the event of a case or outbreak of COVID-19, Public Health will work alongside community partners to ensure frequent communication is provided to anyone impacted, while maintaining the privacy of those involved.

For more information on the memo, please contact Dr. Karim Kurji, Medical Officer of Health, at 1-877-646-9675 ext. 74012.

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Katherine Chislett  
Commissioner of Community and Health Services

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Dr. Karim Kurji  
Medical Officer of Health

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Bruce Macgregor  
Chief Administrative Officer

Attachment (1)

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