



Office of the Commissioner
Community and Health Services Department

MEMORANDUM

To: Regional Chair Emmerson and Members of Regional Council

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

Date: December 15, 2020

Re: Public Health's Role in Ontario's Integrated Health System

This memorandum provides an overview of the unique role differences between public health and primary and acute care health services in managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public Health focuses on population health; health services treat individuals

York Region Public Health is part of an integrated health system and plays a unique role in conjunction with other health care services to ensure the health and well-being of Ontarians. Public Health's role within this system focuses on the health of the population by providing upstream programs and services which aim to reduce or prevent disease, injury and health inequalities. In contrast, health care services, such as hospitals, primary care and home and community care diagnose, treat and improve individual health outcomes.

The Province's integrated health care system coordinates provincial health agencies and programs

Within this integrated health care system one agency, [Ontario Health](#), oversees health care delivery by offering guidance and support to health care providers, ensuring the efficient use of health care funds, and advancing digital approaches to health care (e.g. virtual health care). This system includes [Ontario Health Teams](#), who deliver care that is connected to local communities through several health services and agencies involved in the COVID-19 emergency response, including primary and acute health care service providers:

- Primary health care providers (e.g. family physicians and nurse practitioners) are often the first point of contact between a patient and the health care system. The focus of

primary care includes illness prevention, health promotion, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and counselling

- Acute health care providers (e.g. hospitals) provide a level of health care patients for treatment of illness or conditions that are a result of a disease, trauma or recovery from surgery

Within the integrated health system public health’s primary focus is on the health and well-being of the whole population

Currently, within this integrated health care system, public health remains guided by the [Ontario Public Health Standards](#) with a focus on improving and protecting the health and well-being of the population across the full life course. Public health’s upstream efforts and objectives aim to reduce preventable diseases, injury and death and health inequities.

The work of public health includes a wide variety of activities such inspecting food premises and tobacco retailers, providing immunizations to children through the *Immunization School Pupils Act* , investigating cases and outbreaks to prevent the further spread of infectious diseases, collecting and analyzing epidemiological data to assess the health of the population and promoting healthy living programs to prevent chronic diseases.

Public health, primary and acute care health services each have unique yet important roles in the response to COVID-19

Preventing and minimizing the impact of COVID-19, protecting vulnerable populations, protecting the safety of individuals and communities and ensuring the safety of clients and staff are key elements within the fight against COVID-19. Although public health, acute and primary care services collaborate and have supportive partnerships to achieve these objectives, each has a distinct and unique [role in the pandemic response](#). Table 1 provide an overview of these roles which range from prevention to intervention.

Table 1

Preventive and Interventional Roles in the Response to COVID-19

Public Health	Primary Care	Acute Care
Preventive Role	Preventive – Interventional Role	Interventional Role
Implementing public health measures in consultation with Provincial partners	Assessment and diagnosis Referral to testing	Screening and testing for COVID-19 Assessment and diagnosis

Public Health	Primary Care	Acute Care
Community awareness and education	Referrals to other levels of care (such as hospitals and specialist for care and treatment)	Appropriate specialist treatment
Contact tracing and case management	Appropriate supportive treatment	Outbreak management within the institution
Outbreak management	Counselling and education	Infection prevention and control measures
Supporting Infection prevention and control measures	Primary mental health care	Supportive management for long-term care facilities in outbreak
Referral to primary care or acute care for assessment	Health promotion	Hospital staff and other select groups immunization
Public immunization clinics	Client immunization	

Public health, primary and acute care services work collaboratively to manage the COVID-19 response

The Province and the Ministry of Health provide public health, acute and primary care services with [guidance](#) and [directives](#) for responding and managing through the changing nature of the COVID-19 response. Although guidance and directives may differ between services, public health, primary and acute care work closely to ensure the response is managed in a way that protects the health and safety of York Region. For example, in York Region, Public Health has worked in collaboration with:

- The Region’s three hospitals, Paramedic and Senior Services and Ontario Central Region health on mobile testing and outbreak management in institutional settings (long-term care and retirement homes and congregate living facilities) and Markham Stouffville Hospital to provide workplace mobile testing
- Primary health care providers to support planning for their flu shot clinics, ensuring they receive their vaccine requests in a timely manner

Additionally, Public Health provides COVID-19 support for health professionals through a variety of communication channels including through a dedicated [information for health professionals](#) web page.

Collaborations will continue as the pandemic evolves to meet the needs of York Region residents and communities

While balancing the unique roles of each health service, supportive collaborations will continue to evolve to meet the changing demands of the pandemic and to prepare for the arrival and take out of vaccine. Roles within this current environment will continue to be guided by the Province and public health, acute and primary care health services will collectively continue to adjust and respond as needed to prevent and minimize the impact of COVID-19 across York Region.

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