



Office of the Commissioner  
Community and Health Services Department

## MEMORANDUM

To: Members of Committee of the Whole

From: Katherine Chislett  
Commissioner of Community and Health Services

Date: May 22, 2020

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

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This memorandum provides an update to the Social Service Response report brought forward to Committee on [April 16, 2020](#) and the update memo brought forward to Committee on [May 14, 2020](#). It identifies new trends and issues, updates federal and provincial supports and Regional actions to respond to the social service needs of the community, and highlights next steps as the Region moves into the next phase of response. The April report to Council and May update memo 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. Information from Paramedic and Seniors Services not otherwise included in regular updates to Council by the Medical Officer of Health is included in this memo.

### **Staff continue to monitor community needs using a variety of information sources**

One of these sources is the insights provided by the Region's various networks and community organizations that support vulnerable populations. The first community scan of agencies, local municipalities, and advisory boards (Human Services Planning Board, York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee and Community Partnerships Council), included in the [April report](#), was updated to learn more about current needs and anticipated needs as the community moves towards recovery.

In May, Regional staff conducted another survey of agencies to identify current and anticipated issues faced by service providers. Findings from the May community scan are consistent with the scan done in April. Seventy-two organizations responded to the survey and identified the following as key issues for vulnerable populations in York Region:

- Access to food (49 organizations or 69%)

- System navigation (46 organizations or 65%)
- Mental health and addictions support (44 organizations or 62%)

Food security, help navigating services, and accessing mental health and addictions support are also identified as key issues they expect to face in the months ahead. The community scan will be repeated regularly to respond to changing needs in the community.

Attachment 1 summarizes findings from the updated community scan.

## Access to food remains a high priority at the COVID-19 Community Coordination Initiative Tables

Another source of information about issues and needs is the [COVID-19 Community Coordination Initiative](#) established by the Region and United Way Greater Toronto (further information about the activities of this initiative is provided later in this memo). Access to food remains a high priority at the COVID-19 Community Coordination Tables, especially for isolated, high risk seniors and unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness. In view of the needs of seniors, a third working table has been established to focus on seniors, in addition to the tables already in place for people who are homeless, and on food insecurity.

## Calls to Access York and 211FindHelp support community network findings

Data from Access York and 211Findhelp provide insights on community needs. Calls related to financial assistance and food security remain high priorities in the community. The need for mental health supports is emerging as a growing issue. Table 1 summarizes inquiries to Access York and 211FindHelp reported by topic, volume and time period.

**Table 1**  
**Summary: Access York and 211FindHelp Calls**

Topic/Category	Access York		211FindHelp	
	April 3 to 16	April 17 to 30	April 3 to 16	April 17 to 30
Financial Assistance	1654 (36%)*	1,925 (34%)*	1,469 (26%)	38 (12%)
Health (including COVID-19)	862 (19%)*	1,469 (26%)*	34 (9%)	38 (12%)
Food Security	Not a category		98 (25%)	52 (17%)
Mental Health Support	Not a category		22 (6%)	35 (11%)

Topic/Category	Access York		211FindHelp	
	April 3 to 16	April 17 to 30	April 3 to 16	April 17 to 30
Other	2048 (45%)*	2321 (41%)*	167 (43%)	152(48%)

\*Includes inquiries related and not related to COVID-19

## **York Region community agencies continue to help respond to COVID-19 needs, including through local projects and initiatives funded under United Way**

As part of the Community Coordination Initiative the Region co-hosts with United Way Greater Toronto, community agencies identify collaborative opportunities and share information on funding opportunities, including those administered by the United Way.

Since the May memo, the number of locally funded projects under the United Way’s [Local Love Fund](#) has risen to 19 (from 11). These initiatives enable much-needed supports, including: providing grocery cards to 20 families and new online supports for clients involved with the criminal justice system across York Region; and safely preparing and distributing 135 grocery gift cards and 600 meals to 150 youth, families and men at-risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Discussions as part of the Community Coordination Initiative have also helped with securing additional funding for three York Region homelessness supports agencies. Additional funding under the Reaching Home federal program administered by the United Way will help deliver the enhanced emergency and respite services and mobile supports described later in this memorandum.

To ensure resources get where they are needed, the Community Coordination Initiative has developed an online [donation and resource matching tool](#) to help meet needs of vulnerable people in the community during and after COVID-19 pandemic. If an agency needs resources, or has resources to donate, they complete the online form and the community partners mobilize the request. Reflective of the partnership, it is housed on the Region’s website and moderated by United Way Greater Toronto.

## **Sustainability of the non-profit and charitable sector in the face of COVID-19 has been flagged as an issue going forward**

The non-profit and charitable sector—on the front lines of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic—has expressed concerns over increased demand for services in the face of reduced revenues due to significant fundraising limitations. In response, new measures were announced by the federal government that include income tax submission deferrals, interest free loans and funding to select groups. The sector, however, continues to advocate for further supports, including a \$10 billion emergency stabilization fund from the federal government.

The Region recognizes the importance of the non-profit and charitable sector. The Region partners with community agencies to address service gaps, including through projects and initiatives supported under the Community Investment Fund. The Region's Community Coordination Initiative co-hosted with United Way is supporting the sector by regularly sharing information on funding sources and resources, providing a grant proposal writing workshop and on-line compassion fatigue session, supporting cross-sector collaboration, and developing and maintaining a resource-matching tool.

### **The risk of infection in congregate living settings is high, and the Region is doing its part to help provide information and supports**

York Region was one of the first communities to recognize the needs of congregate care residential settings. The safety and health of vulnerable populations in congregate living settings (including long-term care facilities, shelters, emergency housing, group homes and other supportive living settings) and the workers caring for them continues to be another key issue. While funding, licensing, clients and service types vary, these settings serve vulnerable people who may share areas of the homes such as dining and common areas, washrooms and bedrooms, making them vulnerable to COVID-19.

To help identify and get supports for these sites, the Region has established weekly discussions with the health sector as well as Provincial Ministries that, like the Region, oversee congregate environments, as well as the first detailed listing of all congregate housing providers. This was done with help from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and Ministry of Health. Under the leadership of Public Health, paramedic services and the three hospitals, the list is being used for proactive testing of residents and staff consistent with [provincial direction](#) for long-term care homes and community living settings issued in April 2020.

To date, staff and residents of the Region's two long-term care homes have been tested; all results received to date were negative. Testing of staff and residents of the 5 Emergency Housing facilities operated on behalf of the Region, 22 Housing with Supports facilities that the Region licenses/funds and that house approximately 630 residents is in progress. In addition to testing, Provincial measures to streamline process for requesting personal protective equipment were introduced in April to help address this key need in congregate living settings.

### **Rent arrears are an emerging concern for community housing providers including Housing York Inc., and efforts are being made to help vulnerable residents maintain housing**

Community housing providers continue to work with residents to connect them to income supports, adjust subsidized rents where appropriate, and make referrals to the Region's COVID-19 community housing market rent benefit program. Rent arrears are emerging as a concern in communities that serve working-age households. Preliminary analysis of the arrears suggests that COVID-19 related income losses are only one contributing factor. For Housing York Inc., although market rent resident arrears have the greatest financial impact, there are more subsidized households with new arrears than there are market households who haven't paid

their rent. Community housing providers have reported that some residents have interpreted media coverage and the temporary suspension of Landlord and Tenant Board eviction hearings to mean that since they cannot be evicted, they do not have to pay their rent.

Community housing providers rely on the Landlord and Tenant Board processes to require residents who are in default to pay their rent. For some residents, an enforceable payment plan ordered by the Landlord and Tenant Board is the only effective way to preserve a tenancy. Non-payment of rent could have the unintended consequence of putting vulnerable households at greater risk of eviction when the Landlord and Tenant Board is operating again, as it may be difficult to pay what is owing. The Housing Services team continues to work to ensure residents can maintain their housing and understand the need to pay their rent.

## **Federal and provincial governments continue to announce new supports**

Since the April report and May update memo, the federal and provincial governments have made further announcements regarding financial and social supports, including:

### **Federal Actions:**

- Announced plans to cost share [wage top-ups for essential workers](#). The Government of Canada will provide up to \$3 billion in support to increase the wages of low-income essential workers. Each province or territory will determine which workers would be eligible for support, and how much support they will receive (see COVID-19: Temporary Pandemic Pay below)
- Provided an [extra \\$300 per child](#) for families receiving the Canada Child Benefit to help them deal with the added pressures of COVID-19. Eligible families will automatically receive this one-time increase as part of their scheduled benefit payment in May
- Announced an investment of \$240.5 million to develop, expand, and launch virtual care and mental health tools to support Canadians. This investment will support [Wellness Together Canada](#), an online portal that provides Canadians with free resources, tools, and professional support services to help with wellness and resilience, as well as mental health and addictions
- Announced an increase to the [Canada Emergency Student Benefit](#), increasing benefits to \$2,000 per month (up by \$250) for eligible students with dependents or disabilities. The benefit provides support to students and new graduates who are not eligible for the [Canada Employment Response Benefit](#) or Employment Insurance or unable to work due to COVID-19. This benefit would be available from May to August 2020
- Extended the [Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy](#) which generally covers 75% of an employee's wages – up to \$847 per week - for employers of all sizes and across all sectors who have suffered a drop in gross revenues of at least 15% in March and 30% in April and May. The subsidy has been extended into the summer

- Provided additional financial support of \$2.5 billion for a [one-time tax-free payment](#) for seniors eligible for the Old Age Security pension, with an additional \$200 for seniors eligible for the Guaranteed Income Supplement. This measure would give a total of \$500 to individuals who are eligible to receive both the Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and will help them cover increased costs caused by COVID-19

### Provincial Actions:

- Launched an [independent commission into Ontario's long-term care system](#) beginning in September 2020. This commission will provide guidance on how to improve the long-term care system and better protect residents and staff from future outbreaks. Details including terms of reference, membership, leadership of the commission and reporting timelines will be finalized over the coming months
- Continued plans to distribute [COVID-19: Temporary Pandemic Pay](#) to frontline staff at heightened risk during the COVID-19 outbreak. Eligible frontline workers will receive temporary pandemic pay directly from their employer. As an eligible employer and service system manager, the Region will be required to administer the program. The province is expected to provide details soon on how the Region is to allocate the funding, and on eligibility
- Expanded [virtual mental health supports](#) for Ontarians experiencing anxiety and depression, including frontline health care workers, during the COVID-19 outbreak. These Internet-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy programs will be provided at no out-of-pocket costs to Ontarians across the province
- Approved an [emergency order](#) to enable available school board employees to be voluntarily redeployed to congregate care settings during the COVID-19 pandemic, including hospitals, long-term care homes, retirement homes and women's shelters. Many of these congregate care settings are in need of staff such as maintenance workers
- Protected [licensed child care](#) in Ontario during the COVID-19 outbreak by ensuring parents retain access to local licensed child care, as well as EarlyON Child and Family Centres. Together with federal and municipal partners, this plan provides supports to licensed child care providers to ensure they remain sustainable and ready to open when parents return to work
- Funded [counselling service providers](#) to develop text and online chat platforms, set up toll-free lines, provide on-demand interpreter services and hire additional staff to respond to increased call volume. Programs will ensure those who have experienced or are at risk of sexual assault, gender-based violence or human trafficking have continued access to counselling and other critical services they need to stay safe, heal and rebuild their lives

- Provided relief for those using the [Ontario Drug Benefit Program](#) by eliminating co-pay requirements until July 1, 2020. Existing and new [Trillium Drug Program](#) households can also apply for an income reassessment to help reduce the financial burden for families during the outbreak

## **York Region continues to develop and implement actions as part of its social service response to COVID-19**

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

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

- In collaboration with United Way Greater Toronto, secured additional funding for Inn From the Cold (seasonal shelter for people who are homeless), Krasman Memorial Centre for Community Health (agency that offers peer support-based programs, physical hubs and resources for people with substance use and housing challenges) and LOFT Community Services' Street Outreach Van. The funding from the federal Reaching Home program will help enhance delivery of emergency and respite services (food/meals, clothing, showers, laundry) and mobile supports to residents experiencing homelessness
- Continued operation of the self-isolation shelter in East Gwillimbury. The site provides a safe place and supports for people experiencing homelessness to isolate while they are awaiting COVID-19 test results, or are confirmed positive with mild symptoms or are asymptomatic. As of May 20, 2020, the site has helped York Region hospitals support 15 clients during the 7 weeks it has been in operation
- Provided additional funding of \$87,800, training and direct client supports, including enriched in-home activities, to Housing with Support operators for the care of vulnerable residents. Social Services staff hold weekly information and issue resolution sessions with Operators to provide information and resources including infection prevention, resident mental health, acquisition of personal protective equipment and business supports
- Began operating a transitional isolation shelter in the Township of King on May 13. York Region has partnered with Kingbridge Conference Centre and The Salvation Army to provide people experiencing homelessness a place to safely self-isolate for up to 14 days. During that time, they will also receive a range of services and supports, including an individualized housing plan to help facilitate transition into stable housing
- Established a partnership, consisting of representatives from the Region, local York Region hospitals, Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, and Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, to work collaboratively to address challenges and risks in congregate living settings

- Implemented wellness checks with 60 seniors living in 11 community housing locations

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

- Opened a sixth emergency child care centre for children of essential healthcare and other front-line workers. To date, 187 applications have been received and 99 children have been placed (as of May 20)
- Followed provincial directive to test all staff in emergency child care centres for COVID-19 before May 15, 2020, to ensure the continued safety of families, staff and frontline workers. One staff member in one of the Region's emergency child care centres tested positive. All staff as well as the 10 children who were attending that centre were required by York Region Public Health to self-isolate for 14 days. The centre underwent enhanced cleaning and disinfection and will reopen June 1
- Expanded services to support families with children with special needs through virtual visits. Work is underway to create opportunities for virtual group sessions, to bring different families together to build connections and reduce social isolation
- Offered 22 online professional development learning sessions. In May, more than 1,200 early learning and child care professionals participated
- Provided support to emergency child care centre staff to help children with special needs as well as others who are struggling with the changes encountered in the last few months. Led by Early Intervention Services, staff from all emergency child care centres are working together to support each other and the children
- In response to the Province's child care sustainability funding approach, partnered with Economic Development to provide information and resources to child care operators about programs and benefits available from the federal and provincial government. Staff are also working with the Ministry of Education and local child care agencies to implement the provincial approach which will be focused on fixed overhead costs and salary and wage supports and will be offered in combination with available federal supports
- Partnered with all three local hospitals to offer virtual Neonatal Follow Up clinics, with close to 100% participation. This partnership means families whose children have a higher risk of medical complications or developmental delays are seen by a multi-disciplinary team, including York Region Children's Services staff. Families have expressed gratitude for this support when so many other services are unavailable

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

- Issued additional discretionary benefits to eligible Ontario Works customers. On May 1st, the Province announced that the additional emergency discretionary benefit for eligible



Ontario Works customers would be extended for three months (May to July). These monthly benefits (\$100 for singles, \$200 for families) are 100% funded by the Province. Since the benefit was introduced the Region has issued the benefit to 744 singles and 660 families for a total of almost \$223,326 (as of May 15)

- Ontario Works staff connected with over 2,800 customers in less than 3 days to help ensure no over-payments as a result of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Some customers receiving both Ontario Works and CERB funds would have had to refund the Province as much as two months of funding. Claw-back of Ontario Works overpayments would have caused additional hardship to customers. Through this process, more than 1,700 overpayments were avoided
- Through careful workload management, virtual service adjustments and staff supports, staff has managed the continued steady increase in the Ontario Works caseload. As of the end of April 2020, there were 8,914 customers compared to 7,383 in April 2019 (a 21% increase compared with April 2020)
- Instituted new methods to provide flexible supports and services through enhanced ways to connect with Ontario Works customers. Improved intake and eligibility processes are enabling caseworkers to schedule appointments more quickly. Email and video-conferencing are being explored to further improve the way we are communicating with customers

### **Emergency Food Access**

- In response to the COVID-19 Community Coordination Initiative's focus on emergency food, provided approximately \$24,000 in additional monthly Community Investment funding to the Food Bank of York Region to rent and operate a refrigerated truck to increase and safely distribute food to food banks and other meal programs throughout the Region, and to the York Region Food Network to increase the number of prepared meals for vulnerable residents through agency partners such as Canadian Mental Health Association (Housing First program)

### **Review of Community Investment Funded projects has identified additional funding for new initiatives to support the Region's social service response**

Regional staff has completed their engagement with agencies to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on projects funded under the Community Investment Fund. A total of 45 projects in 2020, delivered by 38 agencies, were approved for \$5.6 million in funding. Each project was carefully reviewed to identify and support opportunities to scale up, scope down or pivot to reflect service delivery restrictions and to better support social service needs. Recommendations are being finalized, and will be presented to the Regional Chairman and Commissioner of Community and Health Services for approval and reported to Council as part of future updates.

## **Paramedic Services continues to play an integral role in the health care system**

Overall 911 call volume continues to be lower than usual, although there has been an increase in the number of calls from Retirement Homes. In addition to responding to 911 calls, paramedics and the community paramedicine team continue to provide the additional supports described in the May 14, 2020 update memo, as well as carrying out the following:

- Established an emergency response team with community paramedics to support public health and hospitals to conduct testing in long-term care homes and congregate care settings
- Conducted COVID-19 testing of health care workers on site at Paramedic Services headquarters

## **Seniors Services maintains “an iron ring” of preventative measures around the Region’s long-term care homes**

As of May 5, according to provincial data, 234 of Ontario’s 630 long-term care homes had a COVID-19 outbreak. As of May 6, 2020, York Region’s two municipally operated long-term care homes (Maple Health Centre with 100 beds and Newmarket Health Centre with 132 beds) have not experienced a positive case of COVID-19 in a resident or staff member.

Many preventative measures were put in place well before the province mandated them. In addition to the actions previously reported to Council on May 14, the Homes have also implemented the following measures:

- Proactively created well-stocked isolation units in each Home to be used if a resident tests positive
- Updated the screening questions asked of all staff and essential visitors to include questions about the growing list of potential symptoms associated with COVID-19
- Conducted Public Health Ontario’s Infection Prevention and Control Audit to identify gaps and implemented required measures

Additional [provincial funding](#) was announced by the Ministry of Health on May 7, 2020, to provide long-term care homes with more COVID-19 Prevention and Containment Funding. The initial disbursement in May will provide each of the Region’s two Homes with a base allocation of \$12,000 and \$200 per bed to support the necessary incremental expenditures of long-term care homes to prevent and contain COVID-19.

## **York Region will continue to work with other levels of government to identify and address social service needs**

Community and Health Services staff actively participate at various provincial tables, including weekly virtual meetings with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, Ministry

of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Ontario Municipal Social Services Association Ontario, Ministry of Education, Ontario Association of Paramedic Chiefs, and Advantage Ontario. These tables provide an opportunity to influence directions and learn from others.

### **Social service response to COVID-19 is expected to continue, and will evolve as the situation develops and needs of community change**

While helping stop the spread of COVID-19 remains a priority, Regional staff are planning and beginning to adjust programs and services as communities move towards containment, stabilization and recovery and, eventually, a “new normal.” Depending on community needs and contingent on guidance provided by Public Health authorities, some social service programs and services paused or scaled down over the last couple of months may be wholly or partially restored, and perhaps delivered differently. Innovations to programs implemented in response to the emergency may continue in the “new normal,” such as virtual delivery of some services.

A key priority will be resourcing for the enhanced Public Health response required until such time as a vaccine is developed and a broad implementation program is implemented. Keeping a strong Public Health unit is also needed to prepare for and respond to a possible second or third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another important consideration to plan for is the impact on Social Services when the federal and provincial supports end.

### **Regional activities are being planned and implemented within available resources, including provincial funding commitment, however additional resources may be required going forward**

The Region’s social services response is currently being delivered within the department’s approved operating budget, including the approximately \$5 million in provincial funding under the Social Services Relief Fund. The April report to Council identified approximately \$1 million in unallocated Social Service Relief funding, which staff now estimate will be required to address escalated housing stability and homelessness prevention program needs for the balance of the year.

Regional staff will continue to monitor community needs and their impact on Community and Health Services programs and will bring forward any funding pressures or opportunities, including as part of the 2021 budget process.

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Katherine Chislett  
Commissioner of Community and Health Services

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Bruce Macgregor  
Chief Administrative Officer

Attachments (1)  
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