



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
Dr. Karim Kurji, Medical Officer of Health

Date: April 6, 2021

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

This memorandum provides an update on the current Public Health COVID-19 response brought forward to Council in [February 2021](#). The emergency response is a corporate wide effort, and Public Health remains grateful to the Corporation and Regional Council for prioritizing the response and the critical supports provided.

March 11, 2021 was declared as a national day of observation for COVID-19

March 11, 2021 marked the day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. To commemorate the significant impacts and life lost due to COVID-19 the Government of Canada declared March 11, 2021 as a [National Day of Observance for COVID-19](#). To reflect upon the last the past year, leaders from across our health system gathered to share personal thoughts and provide words of encouragement through a [COVID-19 Pandemic Commemoration Video](#).

In York Region, since the activation of Public Health Emergency Operation Centre which opened on January 23, 2020 over:

- 35,518 COVID laboratory confirmed cases have been investigated and close contacts followed by public health's case, contact and outbreak management teams
- 889 confirmed COVID-19 outbreaks in workplaces, institutional and congregate living facilities, childcare and school settings and within the community have been investigated

Public Health remains steadfast in its response to the ongoing changing demands of the COVID-19 Pandemic through case and contact management, outbreak management and

infection control measures, enforcing provincial legislation, collaborating with partners to support communities with higher rates of COVID-19.

Additionally, Public Health in collaboration with community, hospital and community partners, has initiated York Region’s [COVID-19 Vaccination Program](#). York Region’s COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force and Mass Immunization Working Groups continue to prepare for an increasing steady supply of vaccine and immunization of York Region residents through the guidance of the Province’s [COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan](#).

On April 3, 2021, York Region moved into the Provincial emergency break shutdown with enhanced public health and workplace safety measures

The Provincial [emergency break shutdown](#) includes measures to interrupt the increasing spread and transmission of COVID-19 and variants of concern. An emergency break shutdown combined with [public health safety measures](#) aims to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and variant of concerns by decreasing the number of daily contacts with individuals outside of an immediate household.

Table 1 outlines York Region’s data levels for weekly incidence rate, positivity rate, reproductive number (Rt), active outbreaks and hospital admissions as of April 4, 2021. Attachment 1 outlines York Region’s data levels for these indicators as well as the data thresholds for each level of control of the Provincial framework. Although York Region saw recent improvements under the stay-at-home order, since early-March weekly case incidence, % positivity and Rt has increased. Data levels for weekly case incidence are at levels seen in early January 2021, while the Region was under the Provide Wide Shutdown.

Table 1

York Region Data Levels as of April 4, 2021

Data Levels	York Region Status
~Average weekly incidence per 100,000	174.2
~~*% positivity	7.44
~~~**Rt	1.12
***Institutional outbreaks	14
***Workplace outbreaks	18
***School outbreaks	20
***Childcare centre outbreaks	5

Data Levels	York Region Status
***Day Programs	1
~~~~New non-ICU hospital admissions	29
~~~~New ICU hospital admissions	3

Data notes:

- ~For the week of March 29, 2021 to April 4, 2021
- ~~For the week of March 28, 2021 to April 3, 2021
- ~~~ For March 25 based on Estimated date of Infection.
- ~~~~ For March 28, 2021 to April 3, 2021
- *% positivity is the proportion of total tests conducted that were tested as positive (the number of positive tests among all tests completed). This helps us to understand the transmission within our community
- **Rt is the average number of subsequent infections resulting from one confirmed case. This helps us to understand the transmission within the population. This measure is based the estimated date of infection for all cases. The measure presents data with a 11-day lag as some estimated cases which have been infected may not yet be reported.
- ***Total active outbreaks as of April 4, 2021

**York Region has experienced growth in COVID-19 cases September 2020 through early January 2021, a decline under the stay-at-home order, and a more recent increase since early March 2021**

York Region gained 2,011 new COVID-19 cases the week of March 28, 2021 to April 3, 2021. The rate of case growth increased steadily from mid-November to late-December when the Region was under the red (stringent measures) and grey (lockdown/maximum measures) levels of control of the Provincial framework.

Shortly after entering the provincewide shutdown in late December, York Region experienced a greater pace in weekly case growth that came to a peak on January 9, 2021 at a rate of 201 cases per 100,000 population. This case growth was due, in part, to gatherings over the holidays.

From early January 2021 to early March 2021, while the Region was under the stay-at-home order and later returned to the red level of control of the provincial framework, the average number of new cases reported steadily declined. Since early March, the rate of cases per 100,000 population has increased, and the Region entered the Province wide shut down on April 3, 2021. York Region’s weekly case incidence is currently below that for Toronto and Peel public health units. Attachment 2 outlines York Region’s weekly COVID-19 case incidence rates and a comparison of rates with neighbouring jurisdictions between September 1, 2020 and April 2, 2021.

**York Region has experienced changing patterns of COVID-19 outbreaks through the course of the pandemic**

After a period of steady increase in institutional outbreaks between September 2020 and early January 2021, there has been a steady decline in institutional COVID-19 outbreaks in York Region due to the tremendous effort of vaccination rollout to these settings. The benefit of vaccination in long-term care has reduced infections, hospitalizations and deaths among

residents, health care workers and other staff. In addition, an increased understanding about how public health measures reduces the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, along with infection prevention and control leadership supporting each institutional setting in York Region has helped to reduce the number of outbreaks in institutional settings.

The number of school outbreaks have been increasing, an anticipated outcome with the full reopening of schools in early February 2021 and some workplace settings seem to be more prone than others to severe or repeat outbreaks; these include product/materials manufacturing, food manufacturing, service industry and construction. There are multiple factors that may impact why these settings experience fluctuations in outbreaks.

#### **Continued challenging factors:**

- New variants of concern spread more easily than early variants and it is too early to note the impact in institutional settings
- Ongoing community and household transmission of COVID-19 including variants of concern (VOCs), which impacts the probability of the virus entering a setting where outbreaks can occur
- Increased number of VOCs detected in multiple settings
- Varying levels of compliance with public health measures, guidance and policies in the community or workplace setting

#### **Community transmission continues to drive growth of cases in York Region**

Community settings continue to be a source of spread for the virus. Close contact with a case remains the most common acquisition source among York Region residents, followed by local transmission within the community when the source of the case is unknown. Since September 2020, about 52% of cases acquired COVID-19 through close contact with another case. For example, while providing care for a positive case, living with a positive case or having similar prolonged close contact with a positive case when they were ill. Another 30% of cases acquired the infection through local transmission from an unknown community source.

#### **Public Health is prioritizing the follow-up and isolation of all cases and contacts linked with [variants of concern](#)**

As of April 4, 2021, there are a total of 3,659 cases that meet the definition of a mutation of interest in York Region, of which 457 are confirmed as the UK (B.1.1.7) variant, 15 are confirmed as the Brazilian (P.1) variant, two are confirmed as the South African (B.1.351) variant and the lineage of the remaining are either still to be determined, will not be sequenced or assumed to be UK variant due to sequencing changes at the laboratory.

Mutation of interest detected cases in York Region have been reported in outbreaks among different settings, including schools, institutions and workplaces. Compared to other jurisdictions in Ontario, York Region's case count for variants of concern are high with most of York Region

cases being linked to household transmission. Similar proportions of variants of concern or mutation of interest have occurred over time in York Region and Toronto. In both areas, a recent plateau of approximately 60% of variants of concern or mutation of interest cases have been observed.

Public Health has aggressively followed-up on all new cases reported, treating all as variants until proven otherwise. A dedicated team has been established within the case management team focusing on an in-depth investigation of all these cases to identify any places individuals might have been while infectious, putting others at risk. Public Health is also following Provincial interim guidance for variants of concerns which recommends a lower threshold for identifying high risk close contacts. For example, to be considered a true low risk exposure the individual would need to be wearing a medical mask and eye protection for the duration of any interaction where physical distancing cannot be maintained.

Additionally, York Region continues to apply a shorter duration of exposure to 10 minutes, compared to the provincial recommendation of 15 minutes. Continuing to apply these strong case and contact follow-up approaches to managing variants in York Region will help prevent transmission and the ongoing spread of these COVID-19 variants.

### **Ongoing enhancements to the Provincial Case and Contact Management system better supports York Region's ongoing COVID-19 response**

All health units in Ontario are now using the Provincial Case and Contact Management system. Since York Region joined as an early adopter in July 2020 there have been significant improvements to the system, including greater outbreak management functionality and the ability to text and email clients directly from the system. As of March 3, 2021, an upgrade to the system allows health units to:

- Record a client's COVID-19 immunization status in the system
- Use the virtual assistant in both English and French for both cases and contacts. This upgrade facilitates timely contact of all cases and contacts in either official language and will also translate French records into English when the records are completed
- Send legislated socioeconomic indicator risk factor questions (sex, income, race) via the virtual assistant to case and contact

Additionally, since Toronto Public Health began to use the Case and Contact Management system in February 2021 York Region has experienced efficiencies in staff time through the elimination of manual side processes, for example, referrals can now be processed via the system versus a separate fax. Eliminating these side system processes and relying on Case and Contact Management have allowed staff to use time previously spent on manual labour-intensive referrals towards conducting case, contact and outbreak investigations. The virtual assistant within Case and Contact Management also allows case investigator to prioritize cases where high risk situations have been identified (e.g., working while infectious in a priority setting).

## **York Region continues to participate in a SARS-COV-2 wastewater surveillance project for the detection of COVID-19**

Collaboratively, York Region's Public Health and Environmental Services, the University of Waterloo and the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks continue to participate in a wastewater sampling project for the early detection of COVID-19. Currently five locations are being sampled. Data collected is based on an active research collaboration to assess trends in COVID-19 in wastewater samples. Caution is being used in interpretation of the current data collected as uncertainty still exists regarding the best methods and approaches.

Sampling has identified the B.1.1.7 variant of concern (UK variant). This variant of concern was first observed in mid-January 2021 and has now been identified at all sites in York Region with recent results suggesting the B.1.1.7 variant of concern (UK variant) to be around 70% of the sampled wastewater as of April 1, 2021. Attachment 3 shows the increase of the B.1.1.7 variant of concern (UK variant) averaged for all sampling sites in York Region. There is still some uncertainty regarding the exact proportion (noted in the shaded light blue area of the graph). Currently, Universities are developing techniques for detecting the P.1 (Brazil) and B.1.351 (South African) variants separately, which may be available by early April 2021.

The purpose of the project is to better understand the virus signal in wastewater, and how this can inform Public Health surveillance. Examples of how wastewater monitoring has been used in other jurisdictions include:

- Six days advanced detection in wastewater samples in the Netherlands, before any individual cases identified in the area
- Confirmation the virus was circulating in Australian communities, when no individual COVID-19 cases were identified for an extended period of time
- Assessing trends in wastewater when individual testing was reduced or impacted
- Detection of the virus in congregate settings such as residential dorms at the University of Arizona
- The pilot project monitoring plan is also intended to be flexible to adjust to the needs of Public Health surveillance and to incorporate emerging research on best practices.

The Ontario government recently announced \$12 million towards a COVID wastewater surveillance initiative to advance the scientific efficacy of testing methods and laboratory capacity. The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks is leading this initiative with support from Public Health Ontario. York Region is one of the municipalities that will be part of the initiative.

## **York Region's COVID-19 enforcement task force continues to prioritize enforcement requirements set out under the [Reopening Ontario Act](#)**

York Region's enforcement task force continues to conduct safety campaigns, respond to complaints, conduct proactive monitoring and provide education. In March 2021, York Region's task force in partnership with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development completed additional community safety campaigns (March 5 to 6, 2021 and March 11 to 12, 2021) focusing on big box stores, shopping malls, supermarkets, restaurants, personal service settings, along with other businesses resulting in 172 inspections and 15 charges issued by Public Health. York Region continues to also focus on follow-up inspections at workplaces with COVID-19 activity and moving into additional types of businesses (fitness facilities and hookah bars).

Overall, between March 18, 2020 and March 28, 2021 combined efforts of [enforcing COVID-19 regulations](#) by York Regions COVID-19 enforcement task force members and York Region Transit has resulted in 51,529 inspections, 25,515 education activities and 1,116 charges.

## **Section 22 Class Orders, Letters of Instruction and Letters of Expectation are additional tools to assist with reducing the spread of COVID-19**

York Region has issued the following additional orders and letters for York Region residents and businesses:

- [Section 22 Class Order](#) under the Health Promotion and Protection Act whereby all residents of York Region must adhere to in relation to case contact. This order has been an effective tool in follow up inspections with COVID -19 positive cases and/or contacts that are challenging cases and has been instrumental in gathering required information and gaining compliance
- [Section 22 Class Order](#) under the Health Promotion and Protection Act where owners and operators of businesses permitted to open under the *Reopening Ontario Act* to prohibit persons at the establishment from using a Hookah
- [Letter of Instruction](#) for York Region businesses and workplaces with respect to following best practices and supporting vaccination of staff
- Letter of expectation and fact sheet for York Region [Farm Operators and Temporary Foreign Workers](#) with respect to operational requirements and expectations for the 2021 season

Additionally, to further support the 2021 farming season Public Health continues to provide regular updates to the Holland Marsh Growers' Association Newsletters and has completed telephone calls to York Region farms with workers in federal quarantine to check-in and ensure COVID-19 screening is ongoing. Preparations for this season have included COVID-19 compliance inspections at 73 farms with 139 units and 142 annual housing inspections at 63 farms with 142 housing units.

## Health Canada has recently approved two additional COVID-19 vaccines

In addition to Health Canada's approval of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines December 2020, Health Canada has approved two more vaccines:

1. [AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine](#): Developed by AstraZeneca in partnership with Oxford University and manufactured by AstraZeneca and the Serum Institute of India. This vaccine requires two doses and is currently recommended by Health Canada for only individuals [over the age of 55 years](#)
2. [Janssen COVID-19 vaccine](#): Developed by Janssen, the pharmaceutical companies of Johnson & Johnson. This vaccine requires only one dose

## The Province has implemented strategies to maximize vaccine distribution and administration across jurisdictions

To further support the distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines the Province has implemented additional strategies to maximize the numbers of individuals vaccinated by:

1. **Launching a Provincial booking system for COVID-19 vaccines:** On March 15, 2021, the Ontario government launched a [Provincial booking system](#) for COVID-19 vaccinations. Currently through the portal, vaccination appointments are available for individuals turning 80 or older in 2021 and on March 22, 2021 the Province expanded the age eligibility to 75 years and older as part of Phase One of [Ontario's vaccine distribution plan](#). York Region has not yet moved to the Provincial system, other than for the City of Markham, Cornell Community Centre (this clinic is operated by the East York North Durham, Ontario Health Team). York Region has currently maintained its existing booking system which allows the Region to move quickly through age groups and adapt clinic schedules to adjust for any changes in the delivery of vaccine
2. **Expanding administration of COVID-19 vaccines:** On March 12, 2021, through [pharmacies and primary care settings](#), 325 Ontario pharmacies began offering the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine Ontarians aged 60-64 as part of a pilot program in specific regions. On March 22, 2021 the Province began to offer this vaccine to individuals 60 years of age and older and announced an additional 350 pharmacies would be added to provide this vaccine. Additionally, on [April 3, 2021](#) AstraZeneca was extended to individuals 55 years of age and older and it is expected that the number of pharmacies available to provide this vaccine could reach approximately 1,500 by the end of April
3. **Extending the second dose interval to 16 weeks:** On March 10, 2021, the Chief Medical Officer of Health announced to increase the number of individuals benefiting from a first dose of vaccine the Province would follow the recommendations from the [National Advisory Committee on Immunization](#) to extend the time interval of the second dose of COVID-19 vaccines up to 16 weeks

Additionally, on March 5, 2021 the Province provided an update to [Ontario's COVID-19 vaccination plan](#) including information on the [rollout of phase two](#) of vaccine distribution, which is anticipated to begin in early April 2021.

**Vaccine roll out and immunization in York Region continues to take place through Public Health, community partner and hospital clinics**

York Region continues to ramp up [COVID-19 vaccinations](#) in Phase 1 of the Provinces’ three-phased [Vaccine Distribution Plan](#). Table 2 outlines York Region’s COVID-19 vaccination clinic locations where [eligible individuals](#) may book an appointment for a COVID-19 vaccine.

**Table 2  
York Region COVID-19 Vaccination Clinics**

Public Health Clinics	York Region Hospital Clinics	Community Partner Clinics
Aaniin Community Centre, City of Markham	Cortellucci Vaughan Hospital, City of Vaughan	Cornell Community Centre, City of Markham
Canada’s Wonderland Drive Through, City of Vaughan		Ray Twinney Recreation Centre, Town of Newmarket
Georgina Ice Palace, Town of Georgina		Trisan Centre, Township of King
Maple Community Centre in the City of Vaughan		
Richmond Green Sports Centre, Town of Richmond Hill		

**Local Municipalities are key partners in the roll out of COVID-19 vaccines**

The Region is appreciative for the ongoing collaboration and partnership with local municipalities in the planning and operation of COVID-19 vaccination clinics. With the guidance of Public Health, local municipalities are providing invaluable staffing supports and resources at COVID-19 immunization clinics across the Region. Their support is playing a very important role in the roll out of COVID-19 vaccine for York Region residents.

## **York Region initiated the deployment of mobile immunization teams in January 2021 and opened a drive through clinic in March 2021**

York Region Public Health initially introduced mobile immunization teams, including Community Paramedics to support vaccine distribution and administration in York Region long-term care and retirement homes in January 2021. These teams have become an integral part of the Region's immunization plan as they are currently providing vaccine administration to homebound individuals and outreach to homebound individuals receiving chronic home care. Mobile teams will also provide support to drive-through clinics.

On March 18, 2021, Public Health held a dry-run mass immunization drive-thru clinic at Canada's Wonderland in the City of Vaughan. York Region is sincerely grateful for Canada's Wonderlands donation of site space. The purpose of the dry run was to test clinic appointment booking processes, clinic flow and set-up, resource requirements and the use of retrofitted YRT buses (buses provided a space to store vaccine safely, a clean environment to load vaccine into syringes in a comfortable temperature-controlled environment and to keep supplies organized) before launching a full-scale [drive through clinic](#) on March 29, 2021. For this pilot, York Region collaborated with the Central Local Health Integration Network homecare services to book appointments for individuals with significant health or mobility challenges resulting in an inability to attend a static clinic and their essential care givers. In total 460 doses of vaccine were administered during the pilot. York Region is extremely appreciative for Canada's Wonderland's donation of site space for these mass immunization clinics. Their generosity and support of donated site space has provided an innovative way to for residents to access COVID-19 vaccines.

## **As of April 6, 2021, York Region has vaccinated over 60 per cent of individuals within various eligible priority groups**

Working collaboratively with our hospital partners, as of April 6, 2021, over 205,689 doses of COVID-19 vaccine have been administered in the Region (Table 3). In addition, Public Health held vaccination clinics in March 2021 for Ontario Provincial Police Special Constables, York Regional Police and York Region Transit Officers and York Region's Urban Indigenous group.

**Table 3**

### **York Region Data Levels of vaccine coverage as of April 6, 2021**

<b>Data Levels</b>	<b>York Region Status</b>
% coverage among Long Term Care Home Residents	Over 80%
% coverage among Retirement Home Residents	Over 90%

Data Levels	York Region Status
Count and % coverage of Residents 80 years of age and older	40,742 vaccinated, 83.1%
Count and % coverage of Residents 75-79 years of age	26,401 vaccinated, 77.7%
Count and % coverage of Residents 70-74 years of age	34,356 vaccinated, 64.5%
Count and % coverage of Residents 65-69 years of age	18,371 vaccinated, 28.7%
Count and % coverage among health care workers	41,342 Health Care Workers vaccinated, 83.0%
Total number of vaccines administered to York Region Residents at York Region and non-York Region Clinics	205,869 doses
Total number of AstraZeneca vaccine administered to York Region residents through the Provincial pharmacy pilot at both York Region and non-York Region clinics	13,610 doses

Data notes:

- Total number of vaccines are reflective of York region residents who've received a at least 1 dose of the vaccine inside or outside of York Region
- Data may be incomplete due to the way the reason for immunization field is captured or missing postal code information
- Health care workers who work in York region, but do not live in York region are also eligible for vaccination, however these individuals are not captured in the numbers presented
- Eligible age groups are determined by resident age as of December 31st, 2021

**Vaccine deliveries are closely monitored by staff so that clinic sites and availability of appointments may be adjusted according to York Region's supply**

Vaccine clinic operations are dependent upon the vaccine supply, availability from the Federal government and a delivery schedule that is determined by the Province. Staff track and monitor vaccine delivery schedules very carefully. The receipt of scheduled vaccine is vital to clinic operations and requires staff to pivot quickly to either ramp up or scale back clinic sites and appointment bookings. Although delivery schedules are set, schedules may change on short notice, for example an anticipated delivery of vaccine may be due to arrive on specified date as one shipment, however staff may be advised close to the arrival the date the shipment is being split and will arrive on different days (or weeks) or delayed by a determined or unknown amount of time.

## **Internal and external stakeholders from York Region's COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force are developing an equitable approach to increase vaccine uptake among priority populations**

An interdisciplinary group of internal and external stakeholders from the COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force is developing an equitable approach to increase vaccine uptake among priority populations in York Region through:

- Engaging racialized communities to inform plans to reach York Region's Black Indigenous Persons of Colour (BIPOC) community (including engagement with community leaders, service providers and Indigenous stakeholders)
- Ongoing efforts to increase vaccine confidence among vulnerable populations, for example, acknowledging historical threats to vaccine uptake, increasing knowledge about the vaccine, tailoring communications and activities to meet the needs of priority populations
- Providing cultural sensitivity training for all immunization clinic staff
- Welcoming the Indigenous community to two days of Indigenous designated clinic sites with Indigenous signage, and having elders on site
- Ensuring vaccine clinics have translation services available upon request, and a workforce with varied language skills
- Participating in engagement activities that include working with local community leaders to help share and disseminate information specifically addressing vaccine hesitancy and timely information to members of their community

## **Staffing for COVID-19 response effort continues with a focus on mass immunization**

Public Health continues to assess and align staffing needs to ensure mass immunization, case and contact management, outbreak management and infection prevention and control measures continue to meet the changing demands of the ongoing response. In total, 100 case management staff and 50 contact tracing staff from the provincial workforce pool are integrated into York Region's response. Staffing for mass immunization continues to include external recruitment, on-boarding agency staff, leveraging external primary care providers and re-deployment from within Public Health for clinical roles. For non-clinical roles, we continue to work with Local Municipalities and staffing agencies.

**Public Health’s focus and actions remain committed to an enhanced COVID-19 response as the Region moves forward with vaccine distribution and administration**

Until the population has been vaccinated, Public Health will continue to be required to maintain an enhanced response with case and contact management, outbreak management and infection control measures, enforcing provincial legislation, collaborating with partners to support communities with higher rates of COVID-19.

Additionally, in collaboration with hospital and community partners York Region’s [COVID-19 Vaccination Program](#) will continue to be adjusted and rolled out to meet the anticipated increased steady supply of vaccine this over the next few months. The adjustments will ensure continued immunization opportunities for York Region residents through the guidance of the Province’s [COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan](#).

For more information on the memo, please contact Dr. Karim Kurji, Medical Officer of Health, at 1-877-464-9675 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

Attachments (3)

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