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To: Committee of the Whole  
Meeting Date: March 5, 2026  
From: Dr. Fareen Karachiwalla  
Medical Officer of Health  
Lisa Gonsalves  
Commissioner of Community and Health Services  
Re: **York Region Public Health Population Health Assessment**

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This memorandum provides Council, as Board of Health, with information on York Region Public Health's ("Public Health") approach to Population Health Assessment and key trends identified through Public Health's newly launched population health assessment dashboard.

### **Public Health plays a vital role supporting the health and well-being of York Region residents through six core functions**

There are six core functions that together form the basis of comprehensive public health practice:

1. Population health assessment, which focuses on running point-in-time diagnostics for York Region communities (e.g., measuring, analyzing, and reporting on key health trends as well as what shapes those trends and their distribution) to ensure informed action
2. Ongoing health surveillance in which health data is monitored and interpreted in an ongoing, systematic way to enable timely response and interventions (e.g., tracking diseases through wastewater surveillance to detect early case surge)
3. Health promotion activities that focus on initiatives to promote healthy lifestyles and improve community outcomes through action on the social determinants of health (e.g., working collaboratively with municipalities on healthy built environment initiatives, such as supporting planning of the Council-approved [Vision Zero Traveller Safety Plan](#) for road safety)

4. Disease and injury prevention strategies aimed at reducing the incidence, risk, and impact of specific health issues (e.g., working in schools to provide childhood immunization, dental screening, and mental health promotion programming)
5. Health protection measures to reduce the incidence and spread of infectious diseases, food and waterborne illnesses, and other environmental health hazards (e.g., proactive inspections of food premises to ensure proper infection prevention and control)
6. Emergency preparedness and response to safeguard the health of the population (e.g., testing a measles response plan to ensure readiness for a large outbreak and mass vaccination clinics)

### **Population health assessment is a critical, core function mandated under the Ontario Public Health Standards to assess health status and community needs**

Through the Medical Officer of Health and Public Health staff, the Board of Health has a legislated duty to ensure provision of public health programs and services to York Region residents based on the Ontario Public Health Standards (the “Standards”). The [Standards](#), currently under revision, define public health work through foundational and program standards and set minimum expectations for all 29 public health units in Ontario.

Labelled a “foundational standard”, population health assessment is an evidence-informed process that assesses the health status and needs of a community, typically at a point in time. The assessment takes the pulse of the community’s health, providing access to the latest data to better drive public health decisions and build tailored programs and services to meet community needs.

Population health assessments also foster a shared understanding between Public Health and community partners of York Region’s strengths, challenges, and opportunities. This supports meaningful community engagement and helps inform system planning, delivery, management, and evaluation of public health programs and services.

### **Population health assessment supports the goal of advancing population health equity**

Public Health aims to improve community health and reduce health inequities by applying learnings from the population health assessments and using a population health approach.

Population health focuses on improving overall health while addressing inequities that arise from broader social and economic conditions. For example, low-income communities often experience higher rates of chronic disease due to limited access to healthy food, safe housing, and quality healthcare.

## **Social determinants of health shape health outcomes more than genetics or access to services**

This approach also considers the broader social determinants of health, such as adequate housing, income and job stability, and environmental conditions, which strongly influence individuals' opportunities for good health. These factors shape behaviours, lifestyles, and ultimately the health of individuals and their families. They are often more influential than genetics or access to health care services.

## **Public Health's population health assessment work is reflected in an interactive dashboard and summary report**

In 2023, Public Health began developing a point-in-time population health assessment to better understand current and emerging health trends in York Region. It involves collecting administrative data from hospitals and population health surveys, such as the Canadian Community Health Survey. Information from the assessment provides insight into current, emerging, and evolving health trends and the well-being of York Region residents. Data from the assessment is available through a newly launched dashboard and summary report:

1. [Understanding the Health of People in York Region](#) is an interactive dashboard, launched in 2025, that offers a visually engaging and accessible snapshot of York Region residents' health. It currently features indicators that describe the health of the population grouped into eight key topic areas. It allows users to track changes over time, compare local data to provincial benchmarks, and examine subgroup differences. It is designed to be updated when new data becomes available.

The dashboard was developed through a strong partnership between Public Health and several York Region teams, including Community and Health Services' Strategic Department Communications and Engagement, and York Region's Corporate Communications, Data, Analytics and Visualization Services, and Digital Customer Experience. This joint effort leveraged expertise from across the organization to create this valuable tool for York Region staff, health care professionals, partners, and community members.

2. [Understanding the Health of People in York Region: 2025 Key Trends Report](#) is a point-in-time summary report that provides an overview and description of key health trends seen from the most recent data Public Health has access to, as of 2024. It tells a story of the health of York Region residents, how it compares to Ontarians in general, what this means for public health practice, and how Public Health and other York Region services can tailor programs to support residents' health.

## **York Region consistently ranks among the healthiest communities in Ontario**

York Region is growing and becoming more diverse with residents representing many cultures and languages. Population growth and diversity make York Region strong.

Overall, York Region residents report good health and a strong sense of community belonging, aligning closely with provincial averages. York Region consistently ranks among the healthiest communities in Ontario, reflecting strengths such as high life expectancy and strong social networks. Additionally, because of Regional Council's ongoing support of and investment in Public Health, residents also have access to quality low or no cost public health services (e.g., breastfeeding, immunization, and sexual health clinics) and services for low-income vulnerable residents (e.g., children's and seniors' dental clinics).

### **However, not all residents experience these health benefits equally**

Health challenges persist, particularly for individuals and families facing vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are often linked to income disparities, housing instability, and barriers to accessing services. Other notable trends include:

- Chronic diseases remain leading causes of death. Four out of five leading causes of death are chronic diseases
- Mental health concerns continue to rise among all age groups. The proportion of York Region secondary students experiencing moderate-to-serious psychological distress has increased from 42.9% in 2017 to 55.4% in 2023, consistent with provincial trends
- Health behaviours represent an area of opportunity. Physical activity, nutrition, and sleep levels fall short of recommended guidelines, substance use is increasing with age among youth, and non-medical opioid use is rising. The percentage of secondary students who reported using prescription opioid pain relievers non-medically increased from 8.6% in 2019 to 19.1% in 2023
- Food insecurity is worsening and has nearly doubled since 2019 (11.1%) affecting nearly one in five households in 2024 (22.1%)
- Communicable diseases look different post-pandemic. Since 2021, the number of vaccine-preventable diseases has increased dramatically, now reported to be four times higher than before. While still low, since the pandemic the rate of philosophical vaccine exemptions has increased year over year and has more than doubled between the 2022/2023 and 2025/2026 school years (from 0.94% to 1.96%)
- Extreme heat due to climate change is a growing public health concern in York Region with higher rates of heat-related hospital visits among children, seniors, and males. Heat-related emergency visit rate was 6.3 per 100,000 among males and 3.3 per 100,000 among females in 2023

## **Achieving long term improvements in health and health equity require an upstream focus on the root causes of York Region’s changing health needs**

Public Health embraces a “levelling up” approach to ensure those with greater needs can reach their full health potential. One way this is done is through a ‘proportionate universalism’ approach, where programs and services are applied across the board and there is greater service to and programs for those most in need. An upstream focus on the root causes of health challenges – such as housing, income, education, and community design, rather than solely addressing individual behaviours – contributes to long term improvements in health and health equity. This necessitates work with other sectors and community agencies.

## **Public Health is addressing emerging health trends by leveraging partnerships**

Public Health works across different agencies and parts of the Region to address emerging trends. Recent examples include:

- Partnering with municipalities to design walkable communities that encourage physical activity
- Providing early intervention and family support through the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program, in collaboration with Children’s Services, to promote healthy child development, connect families to resources, identify and address developmental concerns as early as possible, and set a strong foundation for success in the early years
- Completing a successful extreme heat campaign educating residents, including vulnerable seniors and children, on the signs of heat-related illness and what steps can be taken
- Working with Ontario Health Teams, hospitals, paramedics, long term care and other congregate settings to ensure readiness and promote vaccination in advance of each respiratory season
- Developing and implementing recommendations of the [York Region Opioid Action Plan](#) in partnership with organizations (e.g., community care support and homelessness programs; mental health and addictions services; police and organizations supporting those who have been involved in the justice system, fire, paramedic services) that provide resources, develop initiatives, and participate in events focused on stigma reduction, prevention, harm reduction, and strengthening community partnerships
- Delivering peer-led programs and substance use related resources to students, school staff, and parents of both York Region District and York Catholic District School Boards

## **Next steps for monitoring York Region health trends to guide decisions and measure progress**

The population health assessment dashboard is designed to be updated quarterly, dependent on data availability, so information remains current. Public Health will continue to update trends and assess data to help guide decisions and measure the progress of York Region's population health. Key areas of future focus include:

- Preparing further reports related to [Understanding the Health of People in York Region](#) focusing on seniors and mental health
- Updating existing indicators with new data
- Assessing potential for additional indicators to enhance the story of York Region residents' health and strengthen the ability to analyze trends by factors like age, geography, and income
- Developing additional summary reports based on updated and new indicators
- Exploring mapping to assess health data by geography to understand local trends and patterns
- Continuing to build data warehousing infrastructure with corporate partners to reduce manual work and enable more automated updates
- Continuing to improve the website to sustain a user-friendly digital experience

## **Population Health Assessment will remain a priority within the anticipated revised Ontario Public Health Standards**

Public Health is anticipating the release of new Standards by the Ministry of Health. Population Health Assessment remains a critical function to support the future direction of the public health sector, outlined in the new Standards. This new direction involves stronger cross-sectoral action on the social determinants of health, a more targeted approach to public health interventions focusing on equity seeking groups, and more flexibility to focus health promotion efforts based on health needs and assets of the local community.

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For more information on this memo, please contact Dr. Fareen Karachiwalla at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 77239. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



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Dr. Fareen Karachiwalla  
Medical Officer of Health



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Lisa Gonsalves  
Commissioner of Community and Health Services



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Erin Mahoney  
Chief Administrative Officer

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