

MEMORANDUM

COM-C 28-2020

Subject: COVID-19 Response and Business Continuity in Community Services
Date: September 8, 2020
To: Public Health & Social Services Committee
From: Adrienne Jugley, Commissioner, Community Services

This memo provides continued updates on the measures Community Services has taken to ensure the ongoing delivery of essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the alternate approaches used to support those most vulnerable in Niagara.

Seniors Services – Long-Term Care

Resident Visiting

Outdoor visiting parameters have eased within Long-Term Care Homes (LTC) and indoor visiting programs have also been permitted as of July 22, 2020 (based on direction from the Province of Ontario). Protocols for both outdoor and indoor visits are in place across all Niagara Region LTC Homes. Homes also continue to provide window visits, telephone and FaceTime visits to support those families who are unable to come into the home. Please note that if a home enters into an outbreak all non-essential visitations are suspended.

Linhaven Outbreak Update

Further to the update in the previous memo, Linhaven Long-Term Care Home was declared in COVID-19 outbreak by Public Health on July 11, 2020. This was due to the identification of positive cases through bi-monthly surveillance testing of staff (mandated by the Province of Ontario), as well as surveillance testing of residents. Through the implementation of outbreak measures within the home, staff were able to bring this declared outbreak to a successful close (with no transmission to staff and residents) on July 30th, 2020.

Rapelje Lodge Suspect Outbreak

Rapelje Lodge Long-Term Care Home went into a suspect COVID-19 outbreak on August 4, 2020 after an employee had a positive test result through the bi-monthly surveillance testing of staff. All appropriate outbreak measures (e.g. heightened surveillance, increased PPE requirements, resident self-isolation, etc.) were immediately implemented by staff. There has not been any evidence of transmission within the home and due to the outbreak measures that are in effect within the home, the risks associated with transmission to residents or other staff are considered to be low. The home was cleared of the suspect outbreak on August 19, 2020.

Woodlands of Sunset Suspect Outbreak

The Woodlands of Sunset Long-Term Care Home went into a suspect COVID-19 outbreak on August 16, 2020 after a service provider with the home had a positive result, through the bi-monthly surveillance testing of staff. All appropriate outbreak measures were quickly implemented by staff and there has not been any evidence of transmission within the home. The home is waiting on further test results to be cleared of the suspect outbreak.

Seniors Services – Seniors Community Programs

Seniors Services will be implementing a blended model of service for the Adult Day Program, which includes a virtual program option to clients as well as a half day in-person model of service that will be piloted in September. Appropriate use of personal protection equipment (PPE) and health and safety measures will be in place to ensure the safety and well-being of staff and clients. The Healthy Safe and Strong Exercise Program was piloted virtually throughout the month of August to client groups. The program is ready to re-open virtually to registered clients for September.

Outreach Services will be continuing with over the phone service delivery while resuming in-home visits based on client need. Appropriate use of PPE and health and safety measures, based on guidance from Public Health, are in place to ensure the safety and well-being of staff and clients. Seniors Services is also planning to resume in-home visits for clients of the Respite Companion Program on September 7, 2020. Clients will be scheduled and matched with a Respite Companion who will be trained on all service delivery expectations as it relates to conducting in-home visits during COVID-19 (e.g. screening, relevant Public Health guidance and protocols, PPE requirements,

etc.). In order to limit the risk of exposure and transmission of COVID-19 during in-home visits, Respite Companions will only be assigned one client.

The Calls for Connection initiative, which utilizes Respite Companions to provide both a well-being screener and weekly social connection calls to clients, has been reaching out to clients who have not been able to access services due to COVID-19 restrictions. Seniors Services plans to expand Calls for Connection into Niagara Regional Housing wellness collaborative buildings and hubs.

In July, Seniors Services implemented outdoor family visiting at Deer Park Suites Assisted Living. Further restrictions that were in place for Assisted Living clients were eased in August so that clients were no longer limited to essential appointments only. Increased opportunity for community errands as well as family visitation within family home settings is in place while community transmission of COVID-19 is low. Health and safety measures remain in place (e.g. screening, physical distancing, mask wearing, etc.), and relevant communication is shared with both residents and families.

Homelessness Services & Community Engagement

Homelessness Services continues to operate the full emergency shelter system, overflow hotel rooms, the self-isolation facility and an enhanced street outreach service. As of August 14, 2020, 158 individuals have been referred to the isolation facility with testing administered in shelter, resulting in negative findings to date.

On July 2, 2020, the Province of Ontario announced additional provincial funding, through the Social Services Relief Fund, to municipal service managers for improving homeless shelters and creating opportunities for longer-term housing that will continue to protect vulnerable individuals from COVID-19. Through this additional funding, Niagara Region has received notice of \$3,013,826 notional funding on August 12, 2020. that can be used for capital and operating costs to continue to address the needs of the homeless system, as a result of COVID-19. Funds that have been allocated towards operating costs must be spent by March 31, 2021, and funds allocated towards capital costs can support projects that must be completed by December 31, 2021. Niagara Region is required to submit a business case to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing for approval that identifies how the Region, as the service manager, plans to use the funds. In order to submit the business case to the Province and leverage this funding, Community Services has started to develop innovative strategies to maximize the benefit of these funds that will address homelessness as well as support any emerging or unmet needs within the homeless system.

Children's Services

Effective September 1, 2020, the Ministry of Education will permit all licensed child care centres to open at full capacity (return to maximum group sizes as set out under the Child Care and Early Years Act), as well as EarlyON Centres and before and after school programs. All programs must adhere to strict health and safety measures (e.g. grouping children and limiting interactions between groups, requiring medical masks and eye protection for all adults and requiring non-medical or cloth masks for children in grades 4 and above, developing COVID-19 health and safety protocols etc.). To support the re-opening of all programs, the Ministry has provided multiple operational guidance documents that includes information on updated health and safety measures that must be in place for re-opening in the fall, as well as specific guidance related to each program.

On August 13, 2020, a memo on mandatory face coverings in child care and early years programs was also provided by the Ministry. As per the memo, licensed child care providers are expected to ensure that child care staff and home child care providers wear face coverings at all times while they are working, and that ministry guidelines are followed on the use of masks and face coverings for school age children. Through the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, a supply of face coverings, masks, and eye protection (e.g. face shields) will be provided to staff in child care and early years programs (e.g. licensed child care centres, home child care agencies, EarlyON Child and Family Centres, and First Nation Child and Family Programs). Non-medical or cloth masks will also be provided for school age children in child care.

Children's Services anticipates that the requirements outlined in the operational guidance documents and the memo on face coverings will be a significant adjustment for staff and children, especially in the child care programs that have run as Emergency Child Care centres, or have already re-opened in July before these guidelines were in place. To ensure that all programs are able to successfully implement new operating guidelines and health and safety measures, Children's Services will be supporting the development of policies, protocols, and key communication materials to be provided.

On August 7, 2020, the Province announced increased funding to the child care sector, in partnership with the federal government, through the Safe Restart Agreement. The funding is intended to support the costs associated with safely reopening licensed child care and early years programs (e.g. costs for enhanced cleaning, health and safety measures, etc.). As result of this, the Ministry has provided Niagara Region with \$4,532,998 of Safe Restart Funding, to support the reopening of child care and early

years programs. The funds must be issued to child care and early years programs by December 31, 2020 and are to be leveraged for additional PPE (e.g. gloves, gowns, etc.), enhanced cleaning, additional staff to meet health and safety requirements, support for short-term vacancies as child care operators transition to full capacity, and any minor capital costs that are accrued as part of requirements outlined in the Ministry's reopening operational guidance or local public health requirements.

As of August 25, 2020, the total number of child care spaces available is 1,909, across 69 licensed child care centres and 69 home child care providers across Niagara. It is important to note that Children's Services did lose one licensed child care operator that administered three child care centres in Niagara Falls, with a licensed capacity of 172 spaces. At this time, there is approximately 12 percent of licensed child care spaces (based on licensed child care spaces prior to the COVID-19 pandemic) operating from the overall licensed child care system.

Social Assistance & Employment Opportunities (Ontario Works)

As of June 30, 2020, Niagara's Ontario Works (OW) caseload was 10,475 which represents a 2.7% increase compared to June 2019. The average time on social assistance has been trending upwards and is currently at 40 months (in 2019, the average time on social assistance was 37 months).

As of July 31, 2020, the availability of the COVID-19 Discretionary Emergency Benefit ended. This benefit was created as a one-time, temporary benefit that was available for three months (May, June and July 2020) to assist social assistance recipients with immediate and exceptional costs related to COVID-19. SAEO received 2,818 requests and issued \$1,003,700 benefits (these benefits were 100% provincially funded).

In July, SAEO implemented the first phase of its staged recovery approach with a service delivery model that incorporates in-person, telephone and virtual services. This service delivery model has allowed SAEO to respond to the needs of high-risk clients while also upholding the health and safety of clients and staff.

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) implemented a number of COVID-19 related measures to ensure that client needs are met throughout the pandemic. MCCSS issued over 50 program delivery and policy changes (e.g. treatment of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit when determining eligibility for social assistance, third party checks, consent and signature requirements, etc.), that SAEO staff have successfully implemented.

On August 20, 2020, the federal government announced that the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) will be extended for another four weeks (for a maximum of 28 weeks). As of September 27, 2020, CERB will transition to a modified Employment Insurance (EI) program. The federal government's planned modifications to the EI program include setting the unemployment rate at 13.1 percent across Canada (contributing to the formula for benefits eligibility), providing a minimum of \$400 per week for at least 26 weeks, making it easier to qualify for EI by requiring people to only have 120 hours of eligible employment, and freezing EI insurance premium rates for two years.

The federal government also announced that they plan to table new legislation that will create three new temporary recovery benefits for Canadians who do not qualify for EI:

- The **Canada Recovery Benefit** will provide \$400 a week for up to 26 weeks. Recipients must be looking for work and stopped working or had income reduced due to COVID-19.
- The **Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit** will provide \$500 per week for up to two weeks for people who do not have access to paid sick leave, and to make it easier to stay home if there is a need to self-isolate due to COVID-19.
- The **Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit** will provide \$550 per week per household for up to 26 weeks. The benefit will be available for people who are providing care for a child, family member, or dependent who is not attending school, daycare, or other care facilities because they are closed as a result of COVID-19 or because they are at high-risk if they contract COVID-19.

Although Canada's unemployment rate is starting to slowly decrease as recovery progresses, labour market analysis still indicates that unemployment rates will remain relatively high for months to come. In light of this, SAEO anticipates that individuals who are not eligible for EI or the the proposed new recovery benefits, and continue to remain unemployed, will turn to OW, resulting in an increase in OW caseloads not just in Niagara but across Ontario.

SAEO continues to focus on implementing proactive measures to mitigate future challenges associated with managing an increase in OW caseloads, the reinstatement of the provincial Enhanced Verification Program, and the elimination of COVID-19 interventions. In preparation for how these changes may impact client needs, staff are working to ensure that the OW caseload is updated to better understand a client's readiness for employment and any necessary referrals that a client may require to address barriers (e.g. housing, mental health, etc.).

Niagara Regional Housing (NRH)

In August, NRH began hearing appeals from tenants and applicants. All appeals were being held virtually but were still heard by a committee made up of board members and/or members of the housing community. In an effort to address the backlog of appeals created during COVID-19, additional hearing dates have been added. It is anticipated that NRH will catch up to the number of appeals that have been accumulated and return to the usual dates by the end of September.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE
Commissioner