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## **MEMORANDUM**

**COM-C 29-2020**

**Subject: COVID-19 Response and Business Continuity in Community Services**

**Date: October 13, 2020**

**To: Public Health & Social Services Committee**

**From: Adrienne Jugley, Commissioner, Community Services**

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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 Day Trips**

Recently, there has been a surge in community COVID-19 infection rates and a re-emergence of significant outbreaks in long-term care homes across the province. After careful consideration of the changing landscape, Seniors Services modified the precautions regarding “day trips” or outings with family and friends to include additional safeguards to prevent potential exposure of COVID-19 within Niagara’s long-term care homes. Precautionary measures include COVID-19 testing and a 72 hour isolation period.

#### **Long-Term Care Covid-19 Outbreak Updates**

Bi-monthly surveillance testing of staff (mandated by the Province of Ontario), triggered outbreaks at Woodlands of Sunset, Meadows of Dorchester, Rapelje Lodge and Linhaven during this reporting period. Through the implementation of outbreak measures within the home, staff were able to bring each outbreak to a successful close with no transmission to staff and residents.

A number of staff with identified symptoms were tested for COVID-19 as a precautionary measure (over and above the bi-monthly surveillance testing). In two

instances, employees' test results were positive and as such triggered COVID-19 outbreaks, including an outbreak at Deer Park Villa and Meadows of Dorchester. The Deer Park Villa outbreak was cleared by Public Health on October 1, 2020 and there was no transmission of COVID-19 to staff and residents. The Meadows of Dorchester outbreak was declared on October 2, 2020 and at the time of this report, Public Health had initiated contact tracing and the home has implemented all outbreak measures.

### **Additional Pandemic Pay Update**

On October 1, 2020, the province announced that a temporary wage increase will be provided to personal support workers, including those who work within long-term care homes, and home and community care settings. The temporary wage increase has been set at \$3.00 per hour.

### **Funding Updates for Long-Term Care Homes**

On September 29, 2020, the province announced funding for long-term care homes to better prepare for and address future surges and waves of COVID-19. Funding has been geared toward many areas of need for long-term care homes including, emergency prevention and containment, staff recruitment and retention, infection prevention and control, and personal protective equipment (PPE). Details on the funding, such as Niagara Region's allocation and how and when the funding will flow to the Region, are still being received and will be shared when available.

### **Seniors Services – Seniors Community Programs**

Seniors Services implemented 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. Virtual programming went live with nine active clients on September 14, 2020. On September 21, 2020 the half day in-person model of service began; clients were offered one day of programming a week. All active clients are able to supplement the in-person service with virtual programming. Appropriate use of PPE, screening measures, and infection prevention and control training, are in place to ensure the safety and well-being of staff and clients.

Virtual registration for the Healthy Safe and Strong Exercise Program was completed through the month of September. One hundred and seventy-two clients have registered to receive virtual programming for the fall.

In-home visits for clients of the Respite Companion program resumed in September. Screening and relevant Public Health guidance and protocols, and PPE requirements are in place. Starting on October 19, 2020, Respite Companions will provide services to two clients per week, due to an increase in the number of clients interested in participating in the program. The program will look to continue expanding the number of clients served depending on local cases of COVID-19 and community infection rates, as well as by gauging the willingness of families to accept service from a Respite Companion that is supporting multiple clients. During this current phase of the pandemic, a Respite Companion will see only one client per day, however, a Respite Companion may serve more than one client per week.

Outreach Services is continuing with over the phone service delivery while resuming in-home visits based on client need. Comparing data from March 2019 to September 2019 with 2020 data for the same period, shows a 28% increase in client contacts. Six hundred and twelve clients have been served between March 2020 and September 2020. 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.

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. Currently there are 59 active clients who receive scheduled calls. Seniors Services plans to expand Calls for Connection into Niagara Regional Housing wellness collaborative buildings and hubs in October and November.

Deer Park Suites Assisted Living continues to adapt to the changes in COVID-19 cases, recommendations received through Public Health, as well as guidance received through the province. Restrictions for clients, in terms of day outings which includes community appointments and outings with family for the day, were eased as of August 11, 2020. 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 September 18, 2020 180 individuals have been referred to the isolation facility with testing administered in shelter, resulting in negative findings to date.

On September 21, 2020, the federal government announced the Rapid Rehousing Initiative (RHI). The RHI is a \$1 billion dollar capital investment program to help address urgent housing needs of vulnerable Canadians by rapidly creating new affordable housing. This program will support the acquisition of land and/or the conversion of existing buildings to permanent supportive housing, affordable housing, etc. The RHI is the newest initiative of the National Housing Strategy and will be available to municipalities, provinces, territories, Indigenous governing bodies and organizations, and non-profit organizations. The RHI does not provide operating funds to support any capital investments that are made and the expectation is to spend the funding received through this program by March 31, 2021. The federal government, in the next few weeks, will provide further details about program criteria and the application process for the RHI.

On September 21, 2020, the federal government also announced an additional \$236.7 million through Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy to help extend and expand the emergency response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Through this additional funding, Niagara Region will be receiving \$1,705,346. This is in addition to Phase One of Reaching Home program funding that was provided in April 2020, through which Niagara Region received \$1.25 million dollars to support the COVID-19 emergency response. Guidelines for the new additional funding, as well as further information on the timeline for spending this additional funding, are expected to be provided in the coming weeks.

### **Children's Services**

Although the Ministry of Education permitted all licensed child care centres to reopen at full capacity as of September 1, 2020, the majority of Niagara's licensed child care service providers have reopened through a staggered approach in order to better accommodate for the increased capacity levels. EarlyOn centres remain closed to on-site visits; however, the centres are continuing to offer virtual services to children and families.

Most child care centres are reporting low enrollment numbers due to a number of factors which include, parental decisions to not return their children to child care, child care service providers ability to find qualified Registered Early Childhood Educators, and a shortage of staff due to employees being tested for COVID-19.

Children's Services is continuing to monitor the reopening of child care centres, which is expected to be completed by October 13, 2020. Further updates on the full number of

operational child care spaces will be provided once reopening is complete. Children's Services continues to provide funding to child care service providers to support their ability to remain open, as a result of the loss of revenue from parental fees.

Resource consultants, who provide specialized support to children with special needs, are conducting a blend of on-site and virtual visits to support children with identified needs in licensed child care programs. Home Visitor employees in Niagara Region's Home Child Care Program are conducting a combination of on-site and virtual visits with contracted home child care service providers. Virtual casework continues for families applying to receive child care subsidies. Registration for the ProKids Program has reopened, however the number of applications is significantly lower compared to September 2019.

On October 1, 2020, the provincial government updated the COVID-19 Screening Tool for Children in School and Child Care guidance. Children's Services will be working with licensed service providers to update and adjust their current screening tools to reflect these changes. Children's Services will be reviewing the new guidance to determine if there will be any financial implications.

As of October 5, 2020, the total number of child care spaces available is 3,907, across 135 licensed child care centres and 2 home child care programs across Niagara. Children's Services anticipates that approximately 20 licensed child care centres will reopen after Thanksgiving. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a total of 11,595 licensed child care spaces across 169 child care centres, and 90 home based providers across Niagara. One licensed child care centre located in Lincoln, with a licensed capacity of 24 spaces, had to close temporarily due to having an insufficient number of staff needed to fully operate the centre. One licensed child care service provider that administered three child care centres in Niagara Falls, with a licensed capacity of 172 spaces, permanently closed due to stated concerns regarding financial capacity, and ability to keep staff and children healthy and safe. At this time, there is approximately 33 percent of licensed child care spaces operating from the overall licensed child care system.

### **Social Assistance & Employment Opportunities (Ontario Works)**

As of August 2020, Niagara's OW caseload was 9,384. Overall, the average caseload has increased by 0.8% when compared to August of 2019.

As of July 31, 2020, the availability of the COVID-19 Discretionary Emergency Benefit, funded through the province, ended. Even though the benefit concluded, SAEO recognized that there is still a need for clients to access financial supports during the pandemic. Effective September 2020, SAEO expanded the list of eligible items under employment related expenses to include COVID-19 related items, as a temporary measure to support OW clients. Items include the delivery of essential supplies for those who are self-isolating, masks, cleaning supplies and sanitizer. The goal through this temporary measure is to improve a client's access to necessary supports and services and remove any barriers that a client may face, to continue assisting a client's life stabilization and employment activities during the pandemic. Funding to support this temporary measure is within SAEO's 2020 approved budget.

In September 2020, SAEO implemented the second phase of its staged recovery approach with a service delivery model that incorporates in-person, telephone and virtual services in both the Fort Erie and Port Colborne offices. This service delivery model has allowed SAEO to respond to the needs of high-risk clients while also supporting the health and safety of clients and staff across Niagara.

As of September 27, 2020, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) transitioned to a modified Employment Insurance (EI) program. Those receiving the modified EI program are eligible for a taxable benefit at a rate of at least \$500 per week, or \$300 per week for extended parental benefits. People claiming EI benefits for job loss would be eligible for at least 26 weeks. The EI program will also allow people with 120 hours of insurable work or more to qualify by providing a temporary, one-time credit of 300 insurable hours for those claiming EI regular and work-sharing benefits. People claiming EI special benefits (e.g. maternity, parental, sickness, compassionate care, and family caregiver), will be provided with a temporary, one-time credit of 480 insurable hours. The modifications to the EI program also include setting the unemployment rate at 13.1 percent across Canada (contributing to the formula for benefits eligibility), and freezing EI insurance premium rates for two years.

On October 1, 2020, the federal government passed legislation for three new temporary recovery benefits. The benefits would apply retroactively to begin as of September 27, 2020 and will be available between September 27, 2020 and September 25, 2021. The three new temporary benefits are:

- The Canada Recovery Benefit that will provide \$500 a week for up to 26 weeks, to workers who are self-employer or are not eligible for EI who still require income support. This would support people who have not returned to work due to COVID-19

or whose income has dropped by at least 50%. Recipients must be available and looking for work, and must accept work where it is reasonable to do so.

- The Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit that 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 that 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.

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.).

On September 30, 2020, the provincial government announced the first phase of the Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal Plan. Through this Plan, the province will be focusing on improved access to employment and training services, developing new tools and modern service options, and ways to process financial assistance faster. Based on many process improvements already implemented and continuous efforts to align services with emerging provincial policy, SAEO is well positioned to move forward with the first phase of the Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal Plan. SAEO will provide updates on these recently announced changes as additional details become available.

### **Niagara Regional Housing (NRH)**

NRH continues to deliver essential services, in all business streams, while taking all the necessary safety precautions and protocols. NRH has reintroduced in-suite maintenance in NRH units. Community programs in NRH units have also resumed, with after school programs in Welland's McLaughlin Street community. The after school programs include scheduled in-person homework help for a maximum of three children, and the delivery of craft/recipe kits. Other communities that also normally have after school programs will receive weekly activity kits, however, in-person programming will not be provided as United Way has discontinued funding that was allocated towards in-person programming.

NRH has coordinated on-site programs like BBQs, balcony bingo and porch visits, in place of programs that were cancelled or being held virtually. Adult masks were

distributed to every NRH unit that included instructions on how to properly wear a mask along with Niagara Region's Public Health contact information.

NRH has obtained a priority hearing at the Landlord and Tenant Board, which recently reopened virtually, in order to resolve a significant tenant related issue. The backlog of pre-COVID-19 hearings have been scheduled to resume at the end of September.

NRH has partnered with Niagara College to have a security student offer friendly reminders about COVID-19 guidelines to tenants, in an effort to reduce any social issues resulting from claims of non-compliance.

The NRH intensification project in Hawkins Street is currently progressing as planned, on budget, and without any delays. Currently, there is a shortage of some building materials needed for the project, however, NRH is working closely with the general contractor of the project to secure these materials and prevent any delays.

NRH continues to assist housing providers (e.g. providers of non-profit and cooperative housing) by sharing relevant communication materials (e.g. signs/posters), updates from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Landlord and Tenant Board, as well as steps NRH is taking to respond throughout the pandemic. The Provider Advisory Committee, which acts as a liaison between housing providers and NRH, began meeting virtually which has allowed for greater opportunity for ongoing discussions within the group.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE  
Commissioner