

**MEMORANDUM**

**COM-C 31-2020**

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

**Date:** November 10, 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**

**Long-Term Care COVID-19 Outbreak Updates**

At the time of writing this report, there are two active outbreaks within regionally operated long-term care (LTC) homes.

**Meadows of Dorchester**

Public Health declared an outbreak at Meadows of Dorchester on October 2, 2020, triggered through a case identified in bi-monthly surveillance testing of staff (mandated by the Province of Ontario). The initial cluster of staff that were impacted at the onset of this outbreak have now returned to work. Two of the four units in the home are now out of outbreak.

The outbreak has not been cleared in the remaining two units as a further positive test result was identified through employee surveillance testing. In recent days, the home has identified a further positive case (employee/student/essential caregiver category) and as such, it has been determined, through an abundance of caution, that the declared outbreak should remain active. Public Health and the home continue to work together to bring this outbreak to a close.

## **Gilmore Lodge**

Public Health declared an outbreak at Gilmore Lodge on October 22, 2020. The home took immediate steps to respond to the outbreak by suspending all visits (with the exception of essential caregivers), isolating all residents under full contact and droplet precautions, and obtaining additional PPE to ensure an adequate supply was available within the home. Public Health initiated contact tracing, and any staff who had contact with a positive case or presumptive case was put in isolation. While this resulted in a significant number of staff being sent home to isolate, staffing challenges were addressed by bringing in qualified and trained Regional casual and part time staff, staff contracted through agencies, and through additional hours of support from leadership staff.

At the time of writing this report, 13 positive staff cases and 17 positive resident cases have been identified. Unfortunately, as an added challenge, the area most impacted by the outbreak is a dementia care unit, where patient wandering is to be expected, and which may have contributed to the number of resident cases. One-to-one care to try to manage those most challenging to redirect continues, and staff are doing everything they can to reduce the risk of further transmission.

In addition to physician care, Seniors Services has arranged for a nurse practitioner to assess and monitor all residents on this dementia care unit to ensure any further signs of illness are identified promptly, and care and treatment are provided accordingly. Most residents have mild symptoms, however, COVID-19 has a compounding impact on these residents due to their existing health conditions, especially for those who are already facing 'end of life'.

This outbreak will continue until no additional cases are identified and the date of onset of any case is at least 14 days prior. Seniors Services has been working very closely with Public Health, and have implemented all required outbreak measures in order to bring this outbreak to a speedy close. All impacted resident families have been notified and are provided with regular updates so they remain informed of the efforts Seniors Services is taking to resolve this outbreak. Seniors Services has also ensured residents can continue to connect with family members virtually.

This outbreak reinforces that increased community spread of COVID-19 can lead to an increase in the risk of outbreaks in LTC homes. Staff, essential caregivers and visitors to LTC homes, despite all the precautions that they may be taking, can still bring COVID-19 into the homes and spread the virus to the residents. Seniors Services is

continuing efforts to reinforce and remind both staff and families about the risks of increased community spread of COVID-19 to LTC homes, and continue to look for additional preventative measures that can be implemented, above Public Health and Provincial direction.

### **Drive By Testing for Staff**

All eight of Niagara's regionally operated LTC homes have implemented a new practice of providing testing for staff who develop mild symptoms through a "drive by" COVID-19 swabbing system at the homes. This allows for expedited testing given the long wait times at assessment centres, and avoids staff having to attend the assessment centres.

### **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 October 26, 2020, 215 individuals have been referred to the isolation facility with testing administered in shelter, resulting in negative (COVID-19 testing) findings to date.

Niagara Region received confirmation on October 26, 2020, that the Region will receive \$3,013,826 as part of Phase 2 of the Social Services Relief Fund from the Province of Ontario. The Social Services Relief Fund has been provided 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. Niagara's allocation includes \$2,000,000 in capital funding that must be spent by December 31, 2021 and an additional \$1,013,826 in operating dollars to continue supporting the needs of the homelessness system during the COVID-19 pandemic, which must be spent by March 31, 2021.

Niagara Region has also been working to develop a robust winter plan to support homeless clients during the winter months. The plan takes into consideration the additional requirements needed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Details of this plan were provided to Regional Council on Friday, October 23, 2020 and will also be discussed during the Public Health and Social Services Committee meeting on November 10, 2020.

## **Children's Services**

Niagara's licensed child care service providers have reopened centres through a staggered approach, after the Ministry of Education permitted all licensed child care centres to reopen at full capacity on September 1, 2020. EarlyON Child and Family Centres remain closed to on-site visits; however, the centres are continuing to offer virtual programs and services to children and families, with a small number of centres reopening to support supervised access visits for families that are involved with Family and Children's Services Niagara.

Licensed child care centres and home child care programs have documented 3,404 child absent days in the month of September that were directly related to COVID-19. These absent days were either for testing, due to children exhibiting COVID-19 like symptoms, or due to isolation by a child or family member. This does not include any absent days that were incurred by children for regular occurrences such as illness, injury, vacation, etc. The absences have resulted in a system's cost of approximately \$155,000 to Children's Services. Children's Services has supported licensed child care service providers with this cost through one-time support from COVID-19 relief funding. Children's Services expects this to rise as COVID-19 cases continue to increase and more testing is conducted, and isolation is directed.

At the time of writing this report, it can be noted that Children's Services experienced a COVID-19 outbreak at the Welland Regional Child Care Centre in October. There was one case associated with this outbreak, and while a single classroom was closed for a period, as directed by Public Health, the outbreak successfully came to a close at the end of the required 14 days and the classroom has since reopened.

Children's Services is continuing to monitor the reopening of child care centres and also continues to provide funding to child care service providers to support their ability to remain open.

As of October 27, 2020, there are approximately 4,800 child care spaces operating across 164 licensed child care centres and 75 home child care providers across Niagara. 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. At this time, there is approximately 41 percent of licensed child care spaces operating from the overall licensed child care system.

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

As of September 2020, Niagara's OW caseload was 8,872. Overall, the average caseload has decreased by 0.8% when compared to September of 2019.

With the introduction of federal temporary recovery benefits (e.g. the Canada Emergency Recovery Benefit) in April 2020, the social assistance intake line saw a decrease in the number of calls through April and August 2020, with an average of 620 calls per month compared to the pre-COVID average of 1,200. However, in September 2020 the calls increased to 900 and it is anticipated that for October 2020 the number of calls will exceed 1000. The two main drivers for this increase can be attributed to the discontinuance of the Canada Emergency Recovery Benefit, and the inability for many people to obtain employment. Over 20% of people applying have not previously been in receipt of social assistance.

In September 2020, SAEO implemented a blended service delivery model that incorporates in-person, telephone and virtual services to respond to the needs of high-risk clients. In September, 560 clients received in-person service and by the end of October, the number of clients receiving in-person services is expected to exceed 800.

The scale and timing of the overall impact to intake for social assistance and the OW caseload will depend on the speed and nature of economic recovery, federal policy and public health factors. SAEO continues to effectively and efficiently implement rapid responses to respond to the needs of clients.

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

The Housing Access Centre received over 1,300 calls in just four days after a mail out was provided to applicants that promoted the Canada Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB). This portable rent benefit assists applicants on the Centralized Waiting List, which is maintained by NRH, in paying rent to their current landlord within the private market. This benefit is timely as many households are anxious about moving during the COVID-19 pandemic.

NRH staff have been working on mapping out and configuring each common room within NRH buildings in an effort to provide a safe space for more services/programs to return safely. Outside and virtual programs have continued to take place on a limited basis.

NRH expects to be able to manage any rent and arrears impacts due to COVID-19 within the 2020 budget. Incremental operating costs due to COVID-19 have also been accommodated within the budget for 2020, as a result of deferred maintenance costs and decreased move outs (also caused by the COVID-19 pandemic). Anticipated incremental COVID-19 costs for 2021 are included in the NRH Board approved operating budget, which relate primarily to cleaning, security and PPE costs. These costs will be funded by the Municipal Safe Re-Start funding announced by the Province of Ontario. The 2021 budget is still subject to Regional Council approval.

As per the Regional by-law, NRH now requires tenants and visitors to wear a mask in the common areas of NRH buildings, including common rooms, elevators, laundry rooms, lobbies, hallways, garbage/recycling rooms and any other space that could be shared by others. NRH has communicated this update to Housing Providers. As mentioned in the previous report, all NRH households have received reusable masks.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE  
Commissioner