
MEMORANDUM

COM-C 34-2020

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

Date: December 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

Long-Term Care COVID-19 Outbreak Updates

At the time of writing this report, there are four active outbreaks within Regionally operated long-term care (LTC) homes. Increased community spread of COVID-19 increases the risk for outbreaks in LTC homes. Staff, essential caregivers and visitors to LTC homes, despite all the precautions they may be taking, can still bring COVID-19 into the homes and spread the virus to the residents. The protocols put in place across Niagara's eight LTC homes have supported efforts to keep residents and staff safe for many months. Despite these best efforts to keep COVID-19 out of Regional facilities, we are experiencing first hand, in this second wave, the challenge and unpredictability of this virus.

Each of the LTC homes in an active outbreak have been working very closely with Public Health and have implemented all required measures in order to bring the outbreak to a close. Seniors Services continues to ensure that all infection prevention and control measures are in place, and there remains adequate staffing and availability of necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to support all required outbreak protocols.

In addition to the outbreaks at Gilmore Lodge and Meadows of Dorchester, Public Health declared outbreaks at both Rapelje Lodge, on November 21, 2020 and at The Woodlands of Sunset, on November 23, 2020, identifying single positive cases further to routinely scheduled staff surveillance testing. These two homes are also working closely with Public Health to ensure that all appropriate outbreak management measures are in place and all resident families have been notified.

Provincial Guidance and Directives: Visiting, Outings, Testing

Recently, the province issued guidance and directives to further mitigate the risk of COVID-19 for residents, staff and families in LTC homes. The guidance is issued in accordance with the levels outlined in the provincial COVID-19 Response Framework and as such, LTC homes across Niagara must follow the guidance applicable to Orange-Restrict level regions.

Effective November 16, 2020, all general visits at LTC homes across Niagara have been suspended. Resident outings including short stay absences and temporary absences have also been suspended, however, essential medical appointments continue to be permitted. Seniors Services acknowledges that these restrictions are very difficult for residents and families, and continues to work together with residents and families to coordinate virtual visits, window visits and ensure ongoing communication is facilitated.

Under new provincial guidelines, essential caregivers are permitted to continue to come to a LTC home at this time. An essential caregiver provides direct care to a resident, such as providing assistance with feeding, mobility, cognitive stimulation, or meaningful connections to support emotional well-being. Each resident may designate an essential caregiver if they require one. LTC homes ask anyone who is considering taking on the role of an essential caregiver for a resident, to consider their personal health and their susceptibility to the virus in making their decision. To ensure the safety of residents, staff and families, essential caregivers complete training relevant to their specific essential care role as well as training on the safe use of PPE and hand hygiene.

The province has also issued an updated Minister's Directive for COVID-19 testing. All essential caregivers are now required to complete weekly COVID-19 testing and to provide evidence of their negative test result as part of their active screening process upon entry to a LTC home. The updated Directive for COVID-19 testing also requires staff surveillance testing to be increased from twice monthly to weekly. Each of the Niagara Region LTC homes provide COVID-19 testing for all staff on-site. With the

revised testing requirements, homes will be completing approximately 6,000 COVID-19 tests each month. Seniors Services is currently reviewing the logistics of completing this volume of testing in-house each month and the associated staffing pressures this might create.

Provincial Commitment to Increased Hours of Direct Care to LTC Residents

On November 2, 2020, the province announced a commitment to increasing the hours of direct care for each LTC resident to an average of four hours per day. Direct hands-on care is provided by nurses or personal support workers to support individual clinical and personal care needs of a resident. Seniors Services is awaiting further details on how this commitment will be implemented, staffing strategies that will be put in place by the Ministry of Long-Term Care as part of this commitment, and if there will be any funding implications.

Additional Funding for Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC)

In October, Niagara Region received additional funding of \$774,050 for LTC homes to support minor capital improvements directly linked to improving IPAC practices. According to the funding requirements, eligible IPAC measures that funding can be directed toward include (but are not limited to) minor renovations to support physical distancing, plumbing or water supply cleaning and repair, HVAC systems upgrades or repairs and / or replacement of furniture and equipment that cannot be fully cleaned.

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 November 15, 2020, 277 individuals have been referred to the isolation facility with testing administered in shelter, resulting in negative (COVID-19 testing) findings to date.

In collaboration with Regional Essential Access to Connected Healthcare Niagara, the Niagara North Family Health Team, Welland McMaster Family Health, and the McMaster University Family Medicine Residency Program, nine flu immunization clinics were offered, throughout the month of November, across multiple locations commonly accessed by the homeless population in Niagara, including emergency shelters and breakfast programs. In addition to this, flu shots were also provided by Niagara

Assertive Street Outreach staff to individuals living in encampments. In total, 101 flu shots were provided to the homelessness system.

Niagara Region, the City of Niagara Falls and Niagara Regional Housing are collaborating on the development of an innovative bridge and permanent supportive housing project in Niagara Falls. The project will leverage a surplus building provided by the City of Niagara Falls. The Bridge Housing project will support individuals in Niagara that are living in a state of chronic homelessness, and who have also demonstrated significant high need in the areas of mental health, addictions, and physical health. The new facility will include up to 21 beds of temporary bridge housing for individuals preparing for permanent housing and permanent supportive housing, as well as three beds dedicated to recuperative care. The recuperative care beds would ensure that homeless individuals, recently discharged from hospital, have access to necessary care beyond what an emergency shelter can support. A range of services will be offered at the facility, including 24/7 case management support services, mental health and addictions programming, meals, primary care support on site, and adult experiential learning.

The facility, estimated at a cost of \$3.7 million, will be developed with renovation funding provided by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) through Phase 2 of the Social Services Relief Fund, an in-kind property transfer and building permit fees waivers from the City of Niagara Falls, and a funding contribution from Niagara Region. The MMAH funding program stipulates that the project must be completed and ready for occupancy by December 31, 2021, therefore, a design-build approach will be taken to renovate the building to meet the strict timelines.

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 September 1, 2020. EarlyON Child and Family Centres remain closed to on-site visits; however, the centres continue 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 1,725 child absent days in the month of October 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 number has been reduced by more than half from what was reported in September of 2020, mostly due to the change in the COVID-19 operational guidelines around screening and symptoms. This does not include any absent days incurred by children for regular occurrences such as illness, injury, vacation, etc. The absences have resulted in a system's cost of approximately \$232,700 to Children's Services in the past two months alone. Children's Services continues to support 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.

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.

At the end of October 2020, there were approximately 5,070 child care spaces operating across 160 licensed child care centres and 75 home child care providers in Niagara. Although there were roughly 11,035 licensed child care spaces available across Niagara by the end of October, the continued shortage of qualified Registered Early Childhood Educators and the parental decisions to not return their children to child care due to the pandemic, has meant that many child care centres are not operating at their full licensed capacity. At this time, approximately 46 percent of licensed child care spaces are operational from the overall licensed child care system. 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 in Niagara.

Social Assistance & Employment Opportunities (Ontario Works)

On September 30, 2020, the provincial government announced the first phase of the Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal 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, Social Assistance & Employment Opportunities (SAEO) is well positioned to move forward with the first phase of the Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal Plan.

In October, SAEO made a number of temporary policy adjustments in order to respond to the needs of OW and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) clients during the pandemic:

- Expanding the Housing Stability Benefit exceptional circumstances criteria to allow for flexibility in responding to individual and family housing crisis
- Providing up to an additional \$600 of coverage for OW clients accessing denture services (in addition to the fees outlined in the Niagara Region Adult Denture Services Program fee guide)
- Expanding participation related benefits to improve access to supports and services and remove barriers (e.g. bus pass, phone, clothing, masks, cleaning supplies, sanitizer, etc.).

Niagara Regional Housing (NRH)

The pandemic has exacerbated many additional health and well-being concerns, particularly related to mental health and addictions. NRH is noticing these concerns first-hand, as many tenants are experiencing increased mental health issues, addiction and social crises, that are often heightened by the effects of poverty and poverty-related issues. In-person supports from traditional agencies that provide supports to tenants, such as mental health services, continue to be extremely limited and many tenants are uninterested in, or unable to access, virtual supports.

NRH continues to deliver programs, supports and services as effectively as possible within the context of changing provincial and regional guidelines (e.g. pick-up breakfasts, delivery of craft / recipe / activity kits, after school programming with in-person homework help, weekly newsletters with puzzles and games, bulletin board bingo, etc.). New initiatives include a partnership with CyberSeniors and Niagara College to distribute refurbished laptops and tablets to tenants in senior and integrated communities in order to equip them for virtual programs and supports. Another partnership with Niagara College is providing intense programming in St. Catharines' Scott Street community, which has experienced a high number of negative social issues.

Construction continues with five new units being developed on Ormond Street / St. David's Road in Thorold and 73 new units on Hawkins Street in Niagara Falls. NRH's development team is also working on the application for the Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI) that will be submitted in early December through the RHI project stream. This

funding is hoped to support the full capital requirement for 25 new units on the POA lands in Welland that have been purchased by NRH.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE
Commissioner