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**MEMORANDUM**

**COM-C 10-2021**

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

**Date:** March 9, 2021

**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**

The increased community spread of COVID-19 continues to pose a heightened risk for long-term care (LTC) homes and congregate settings during this second wave of the pandemic.

In the last report, Seniors Services reported ongoing outbreaks at Northland Pointe, Meadows of Dorchester, Gilmore Lodge and Rapelje Lodge. The outbreaks were cleared on the following dates:

- Northland Pointe was cleared on February 6, 2021
- Meadows of Dorchester was cleared on February 14, 2021
- Gilmore Lodge was cleared on February 14, 2021
- Rapelje Lodge was cleared on February 17, 2021

While there was one new active outbreak at Linhaven since the last report (as a result of employee surveillance testing), it was declared over on February 28, 2021.

## **Vaccine Distribution Planning and Implementation**

In the last report it was shared that first dose vaccinations for residents, staff and essential caregivers of LTC homes were started on January 14, 2021. Public Health took the lead on the resident vaccination program. Residents were vaccinated on-site using the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine through a collaborative effort of Public Health nurses and LTC home staff. All Regionally operated LTC homes completed the second dose vaccination for residents on February 9, 2021. Second dose vaccinations for assisted living residents were completed on February 13, 2021.

Niagara Health took the lead for the vaccination of staff and essential caregivers for long-term care. The last report indicated that all first dose vaccination appointments scheduled for January 21, 2021 and after, were suspended when the provincial government advised Niagara of a change in vaccine allocation and delivery. The cancelled appointments are now being re-scheduled with a target goal of all staff and essential caregiver's first dose vaccinations being completed by February 28, 2021. Further, the second dose vaccinations for staff and essential caregivers, who already received their first dose, resumed as of February 17, 2021.

## **Rapid Antigen Testing Update**

In the week of February 22, 2021, the Regionally operated LTC homes introduced twice weekly rapid antigen screening and once weekly polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing. The Ministry of Long-Term Care (MLTC) has provided a revised target of fully transitioning to the rapid antigen screening three times weekly (with the use of PCR testing only in the event of an outbreak) by March 15, 2021. Over the next few weeks, Seniors Services will be monitoring the reliability of the rapid antigen screening before making the full transition.

## **Updates to Long-Term Care Home Occupancy Targets**

The suspension of occupancy targets that went into effect under the 'COVID-19 Emergency Measures Funding Policy' will continue to be in effect to March 31, 2021. The suspension eliminates the requirement to maintain occupancy within the LTC homes at 97%.

LTC homes have seen numerous outbreaks throughout the pandemic, and during outbreaks, the homes are not permitted to admit new residents. As a result of this, homes have quite a few vacancies. To address this, LTC homes will each be

collaborating with Home and Community Care to develop a home specific admission plan. The MLTC has outlined mandatory parameters for the admission plans as follows:

- Maintain the necessary number of vacant beds to meet the restrictions and requirements under Directive #3, for beds in ward rooms and beds for isolation.
- Ensure the home has sufficient staff to support isolation upon (re)admission (as per Directive #3) and the ongoing care of newly (re)admitted residents. This may include a strategy for hiring and training new staff, as needed.
- Complying with public health requirements and guidance, including availability of personal protective equipment.
- Complying with the admission requirements in the Long-Term Care Homes Act, 2007.
- Working with the placement co-ordinator to ensure up-to-date information about vacant beds in the home that are available for occupancy is communicated in a timely manner.

Gilmore Lodge had already initiated planning work for an admission plan, with Home and Community Care, and has now started the implementation of the plan. The plan includes the admission of 13 residents in the next two weeks. This strategy will help to address crisis list pressures and expedite access to LTC beds, however, it does introduce considerable strain on homes as they manage a high volume of admissions.

### **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 February 23, 2021, 465 individuals have been referred to the isolation facility with testing administered in shelter.

As per the Ministry of Health guidance regarding the prioritization of health care workers for the COVID-19 vaccine, shelter staff and medical staff that support emergency shelters were identified as high priority-level staff to receive the vaccine. At the time of writing this report, it is anticipated that shelter staff and medical staff that support emergency shelter clients will begin to receive their vaccinations, starting the weekend of February 27, 2021.

Homelessness Services is continuing to collaborate with REACH Niagara and Family Health Teams, and coordinate with agencies across the homeless serving system, to inform planning for the administration of the COVID-19 vaccination for clients within that

system. Planning is also underway to ensure clients have the necessary information to be able to make an evidence-informed decision about the COVID-19 vaccine, once it is available for this population.

## **Children's Services**

### **Emergency Child Care Overview**

Children's Services provided emergency child care for school-aged children of essential workers at 18 licensed childcare centres and 28 home child care programs across Niagara, beginning January 4, 2021. Emergency child care in Niagara ended on February 5, 2021, and all child care providers reopened their 'before and after' school programming when in-person learning resumed on February 8, 2021. During the time period that emergency child care was available, 333 school-aged children, in total, were placed in emergency child care spaces.

### **Child Care Updates**

As expected, licensed child care centres and home child care programs documented an unprecedented number of COVID-19 related child absent days in January 2021 (more than 40,000). The majority were due to the provincial stay-at-home order and the closure of in-person learning for kindergarten and school-aged children, resulting in the closure of all before and after school programming. This does not include any absent days incurred by children for regular occurrences such as non-COVID-19 illness, injury, absence, etc. Children's Services continues to support licensed child care service providers with COVID-19 related costs through one-time funding supports. Children's Services continues to monitor the child care system and provide support to service providers in their ability to remain open.

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

As per provincial guidance, effective February 16, 2021, eligibility for social assistance is no longer determined at local SAEO offices. Individuals in need of social assistance are required to create an application, digitally or by contacting a Centralized Intake Unit by phone. The Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS) will assess and grant the majority of applications through a mix of automation and manual granting and will provide phone support for clients who need assistance with the technology or who need to apply over the phone. If deemed eligible, individuals will

receive their initial Ontario Works (OW) payment prior to meeting with a local case manager.

Individuals in need of assistance should be referred to the online application at [www.sada.mcss.gov.on.ca](http://www.sada.mcss.gov.on.ca). Inquires related to outstanding social assistance applications can continue to be directed to Niagara Region, Social Assistance & Employment Opportunities at (905) 641-9230.

MCCSS has indicated they are centralizing the social assistance intake process in order to create capacity at the local level, in part, to respond to an anticipated increase in demand for OW once the temporary COVID-19 related federal benefits expire. Currently, it is estimated that Niagara's OW caseload could increase by 22%, once the temporary COVID-19 related federal benefits expire. SAEO has developed a comprehensive plan to support this new provincial direction, while ensuring supports remain in place to assist clients who are in urgent need (where the centralized process would not be appropriate).

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

CyberSeniors, in partnership with community organizations, has loaned Wi-Fi hotspot devices to tenants at two NRH communities. NRH staff are working with CyberSeniors to determine if this arrangement could be extended to other NRH communities. NRH also received smartphones, equipped with unlimited free calling, text and data, through United Way and Bell Canada. Niagara Region Seniors Community Programs has also received some of these smartphones for distribution to Community Housing tenants who are their clients. The smartphones will enable tenants that currently do not have access to virtual mental health and social supports, to receive the services they require. It will also help reduce the need for NRH staff to go on-site to check in on the tenants during lockdowns or with the continuation of public health guidelines that limit face-to-face interactions.

With NRH and Niagara College student support, Niagara EMS provided flu clinics to seniors in Centre Street in St. Catharines and Ailanthus Avenue/Huron Street/Portage Road in Niagara Falls, in January 2021. This is the second model of vaccine clinic that NRH has used this flu season, both of which were implemented efficiently and without any issues. As a result, NRH was able to reach out to the Niagara Region Pandemic Response Division to offer support in the event that the COVID-19 vaccine could be delivered on-site in NRH seniors buildings.

In an effort to assist Community Housing providers with the social issues that have been increasing throughout the pandemic, NRH has embarked on a three month pilot for mediation assistance, with a mediation company named “2% Factor”, with disputes that have been difficult for Community Programs Coordinators to resolve. NRH believes that an independent mediator may have success with tenants/members who have not complied with behavioural agreements facilitated by NRH staff. The mediator will also provide professional coaching to assist NRH staff. The pilot will be reassessed after three months.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE  
Commissioner