
MEMORANDUM

COM-C 17-2021

Subject: COVID-19 Response and Business Continuity in Community Services
Date: April 13, 2021
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 is one active outbreak within a Regionally operated long-term care (LTC) home.

Woodlands of Sunset

Public Health declared an outbreak at Woodlands of Sunset on March 26, 2021. The asymptomatic case was identified through the rapid antigen screening testing. The positive result was then confirmed through a follow-up PCR test. It should be noted, as we know that vaccination is not a guarantee of protection, that the positive case was vaccinated and had received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. A second, unrelated positive case has also been identified. The second case is an essential caregiver who has not been vaccinated. Residents have been isolated in contact and droplet precautions, as per Public Health direction and all outbreak measures have been implemented in the home.

Since the last report, the following homes have been in declared outbreaks with no transmission of cases within the homes:

- Woodlands of Sunset: March 3 – March 19

- Rapelje Lodge: March 3 – March 14
- Linhaven: February 6 – February 28

COVID-19 Vaccine Update

Seniors Services has completed the initial vaccine campaign for residents, staff and essential caregivers across all eight Regionally operated LTC homes. At this time, the vaccination rates across the homes are as follows:

- Residents: 96%
- Staff: 82%
- Essential caregivers: 75%

Given the high level of vulnerability of residents in LTC homes and that some residents are not eligible to be vaccinated, efforts to encourage staff and essential caregivers to be vaccinated are ongoing.

Public Health and EMS are working in collaboration to develop a sustainable solution to ensure that residents who are being admitted into LTC homes and retirement homes from hospital and the community have a means of being vaccinated. Given the current vaccines available, LTC homes and retirement homes are unable to keep vaccines in-house and manage vaccinations internally. The homes require support with transporting the vaccine and reconstituting the vaccine.

Rapid Antigen Testing Update

Seniors Services has moved to the full introduction of mandatory rapid antigen screening testing across all LTC home sites. Everyone who enters the home is required to complete a rapid antigen screening test up to a maximum of three times weekly. The homes fully operate the antigen screening clinics including administering the tests, processing the tests, communicating results, processing the associated paperwork and meeting ongoing reporting requirements with Public Health, the Ministry of Long-Term Care and the Ministry of Health.

All positive rapid antigen screening results are followed by a PCR test. Anyone who tests positive is required to isolate pending results of the PCR test. To date, the program has been effective in proactively identifying positive COVID-19 cases among asymptomatic staff. The drawback to the program is the significant cost, the impact on staff and essential caregivers subjected to a high frequency of testing, and the

unintended consequence that people may engage in higher risk behaviour if three times weekly testing indicates that they are clear of COVID-19.

Personal Support Worker (PSW) Wage Enhancement Update

The temporary wage enhancement for PSW's has been extended until June 30, 2021. The province has been providing the temporary wage increase since October 1, 2020.

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 March 24, 2021, 506 individuals have been referred to the isolation facility with testing administered in shelter.

Niagara Region Homelessness Services is grateful for the donation from the Rotary Club of St. Catharines, which provided activity kits for individuals in the self-isolation facility, as well as masks, new shoes, towels, toiletries and clothing.

COVID-19 Vaccine Update

The last report indicated staff and clients across the emergency shelter system would be receiving their first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. Throughout February and March 2021, emergency shelter staff and medical staff who support emergency shelter clients received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine through the Niagara Health clinic.

From March 8 to March 19, five COVID-19 vaccination clinics were set up in various emergency shelter locations across the region. The clinics were done in collaboration with Niagara Region Public Health, Niagara Region Homelessness Services, and Regional Essential Access to Connected Healthcare (REACH) Niagara. Approximately 50 to 60 per cent of Niagara's homelessness population received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. The clinics also provided vaccinations to additional staff who support the homeless serving system. Over 250 clients and staff received their first dose vaccine through these clinics.

During the COVID-19 vaccination clinics, clients who attended were offered coffee, breakfast and various nourishments. Niagara Region Homelessness services received a generous donation from Starbucks to support the provision of food and refreshments to clients at the clinics.

Prior to implementing the vaccination clinics, Homelessness Services collaborated with REACH Niagara, family health teams, and agencies across the homeless serving system, to inform planning for the administration of the COVID-19 vaccination to this high risk population. REACH Niagara and shelter staff provided clients with information regarding the vaccine, and answered any client questions to address vaccine hesitancy as well as encourage vaccine uptake. It is believed that these efforts contributed significantly to the positive uptake of the vaccine on the clinic days.

Children's Services

Licensed child care centres and home child care programs documented more than 10,000 COVID-19 related child absent days in February 2021. This was due to the provincial stay-at-home order and the closure of in-person learning for kindergarten and school-aged children, which continued during the first week of February. 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)

Staff from Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities (SAEO), Senior Services and Niagara Regional Housing came together to develop and implement a very successful campaign to help accelerate local vaccination efforts of the older adult community. Together, the team identified hundreds of seniors to contact, designed a process and script for calls, developed a transportation strategy, coordinated bookings with hospital clinic staff, developed a tracking tool and made hundreds of calls to, and bookings for seniors. Staff from the team also attended on site to ensure these seniors were able to access the clinic safely. The team provided the tools and processes developed through this work to the Local Health Integration Network so that their staff could also facilitate calls to their clients.

SAEO and Senior Services staff also collaborated to assist with providing interpretation supports at the vaccination clinic held by Niagara Health for migrant farm workers. Spanish speaking staff were on site at the clinic to provide translation and supports to over 300 migrant workers. Migrant workers live in congregate settings and work in spaces or roles that preclude physical distancing, putting them at a higher risk for infection.

Niagara Regional Housing (NRH)

COVID-19 Vaccine Update

During the week of March 8 to 12, every NRH public housing tenant, housing provider tenant and the majority of applicants on the centralized waiting list over 80 years of age were contacted and assisted with booking vaccines as low-income priority populations. NRH staff, with assistance from Niagara Region Community Services (SAEO and Seniors Community Programs staff) called tenants and tenant/members and registered them online for their first COVID-19 vaccine at the Seymour-Hannah Sportsplex in St. Catharines.

In addition to booking the appointments for the seniors, transportation arrangements were made for those unable to make them for themselves. Seniors Community Programs staff were onsite at the clinic to ensure mobility issues and any other concerns were addressed immediately when seniors reached the site.

NRH will continue to work with partners to assist with the next priority population to receive the vaccine, and has communication materials developed and ready for possible vaccine rollouts.

VIP@home Tenant Wellness Program

The NRH partnership with McMaster University and Niagara College, for the VIP@home Tenant Wellness Program, began in March. The program involves Niagara College Social Worker students contacting tenants of NRH communities to determine their support and service needs, provide them with referrals to programs or services they require, and track their current needs to improve future well-being.

Affordable Internet Services

NRH has begun discussions with local internet provider "*Neighbourhood Connects*" to determine if affordable internet service can be piloted in an NRH community. If successful, this will provide tenants with the opportunity to participate in online programs and supports that have been inaccessible to them at current internet provider rates. In March, NRH was advised that the CyberSeniors program received funding to extend virtual programs to additional NRH communities. With affordable internet and the CyberSeniors' training, workshops and activities, many new social, mental health and educational opportunities will be made more accessible to community housing tenants.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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Commissioner