
MEMORANDUM

PHD-C 9-2021

Subject: COVID-19 Response and Business Continuity in Public Health & Emergency Services (May 2021 Update)

Date: May 11, 2021

To: Public Health & Social Services Committee

From: M. Mustafa Hirji, Medical Officer of Health & Commissioner (Acting)

Current Status as of April 29, 2021

- The latest updates including statistics can be found at the [Niagara Region website](https://niagararegion.ca/health/covid-19). (<https://niagararegion.ca/health/covid-19>)
- Globally, much of the Western world is seeing the resurgence of COVID-19 as variants drive further spread.
- Countries that have had success in acquiring large amounts of vaccine the exception to the above: Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States have managed to lower or flatten their cases through a combination of very widespread vaccination and restrictions on social life. Israel and the UK have endured 3-4 month lockdowns to lower cases, but with high vaccination coverage are now able to reopen widely.
- Canada has not had success in acquiring vaccine early, and similar to what European countries experienced in past months, and most provinces are now experiencing third waves. Hospital and ICU beds are extremely stretched in Ontario which is experiencing the worst wave, and many persons are dying of COVID-19 again.
- As cases have gone up in Ontario, they are also now high in Niagara. Most cases continue to be the result of spread in the community—in household and gatherings in one's home, as well as some outbreaks in workplaces.
- High cases and many outbreaks have overwhelmed Public Health's capacity for follow-up and contact tracing. Most contact tracing is much more cursory. As cases reduce, more fulsome contact tracing will again be possible.
- Retention and recruitment of staff for contact tracing has been a particular challenge. With overwhelmed hospitals and vaccination programs aggressively hiring, staff are leaving to take those opportunities. The difficulty of contact tracing, including the non-cooperation of the public and anger directed towards

Public Health, has made these roles less desirable and more challenging to fill. Attempts are ongoing to recruit more capacity.

- Vaccinations are progressing through Phase 2 priorities, particularly for elderly persons in a sequence of decreasing age categories. Persons with the highest risk chronic conditions are also being vaccinated, and persons with other health conditions will soon become eligible as well. People who cannot work from home will become eligible for vaccination within the next few weeks.
- The increase in vaccinations has come with it an increase in adverse event investigations. Public Health is needed to redeploy and hire additional resources for investigating the hundreds of adverse events being reported.
- Temporary redeployment of chronic disease staff to support mass immunizations has ended, and these staff are resuming work at mitigating and preventing the worsening of chronic diseases that arose over the past year of the pandemic.
- A dedicated partnership with primary care allowed delivering a grade eight school-vaccine catch up clinic during the week-long April School Break.
- In Emergency Services, call volumes for EMS have largely returned to normal levels as business and life has resumed. EMS is also playing a role in vaccination and supporting our hospitals.
- EMS is closely monitoring patient flow within local emergency departments and working with Niagara Health to ensure capacity and surge planning for anticipated COVID-19 related hospitalizations.
- Emergency Management continues to support both Regional and Local Area Municipal EOC's for coordinated response and business continuity planning.

Previous (April 13) Summary on Business Continuity

Public Health & Emergency Services deliver essential services year-round to impact the health and health equity of Niagara residents, and to pursue Council's strategic goal of building a Healthy and Vibrant Community. During the current pandemic, the department is playing a central role in the response to protect and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, while also continuing the essential work around all other health issues that continue to affect residents.

While COVID-19 has commanded the primary focus of Public Health and society at large, it is important to remember that most of the pre-existing health issues continue to exist and are responsible for more deaths (4,500 per year in Niagara) than the projected number of deaths from COVID-19 in Niagara (250–1,000 deaths).

Activity in Public Health & Emergency Services reflects focusing on COVID-19 response, while also ensuring ongoing service to protect the health in other essential areas.

Public Health Emergency Operations Centre for COVID-19/Pandemic Response Division

Current Status of Operations

Public Health began work in response to COVID-19 on January 8, 2020. As volume of activities grew, the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre was partly activated on January 28, 2020 to ensure coordination of work and central leadership. By March 9, staff had begun to be redeployed from regular duties to supporting the activities of the Emergency Operations Centre, which was fully activated at this time. Currently over 200 staff work in COVID-19 emergency response (equivalent to 70% of the staff complement in Public Health), with close to another 100 being recruited currently.

Emergency Operations have now transitioned to the new temporary Pandemic Response Division to consolidate most pandemic response activities, and streamline reporting lines and management processes. This was explained in more detail in [CWCD 299-2020](#).

Significant Initiatives or Actions Taken

There are five principle lines of response to COVID-19:

1. **Case, Contact, and Outbreak Management.** Public Health is following-up with every person diagnosed with COVID-19 to ensure they are isolated and no longer infecting others. Public Health identifies all contacts of that person who may also have been infected, and arranges for those contacts to be isolated as well. That way, if they develop illness, they cannot have exposed anyone. By isolating all persons who may be infected with COVID-19, the chain of transmission can be broken. Case and contact management will be critical to ensuring ongoing control of COVID-19 transmission if and when physical distancing measures are relaxed.

A critical subset of this work is advising and supporting the management of outbreaks in long term care homes, retirement homes, and other health care facilities. We have seen that most cases and deaths in Niagara, Ontario, and Canada as a whole have occurred in these settings. Better protecting them and supporting these facilities to manage outbreaks are our top priority.

Public Health usually has 12 staff working on case, contact, and outbreak management year-round for 75 diseases of public health significance (e.g. measles, influenza, salmonella, HIV). Within the Emergency Operations Centre, this had been scaled-up to over 100 staff. However, with the need to support mass immunizations, and staff choosing to leave due to increased workload stressors (quickly growing workloads, lack of cooperation by the public, high levels of anger directed towards them by clients), the team is now down to only about 25 persons, and grossly insufficient to meet current demands. Work is underway to try and recruit new staff, however, the hiring pool is very thin as all health care organizations are trying to hire more staff during this time.

In addition, Public Health is further expanding its capacity by “out sourcing” some of this work to staff offered by the Public Health Agency of Canada and the provincial government. With Council’s approval received on August 13, 2020, there is now the ability to enter into assistance agreements with other local public health agencies to further expand capacity if needed. However, with most parts of the province experiencing surges of cases, it is unlikely Niagara will be able to leverage the support of others. The case/contact/outbreak management operation now works 7 days a week, 08:00 to 19:30.

2. **Supporting Health Care & Social Services Sector.** The health care and social services sectors play an essential role in supporting those most vulnerable, including diagnosing and caring for those who contract COVID-19. Public Health has been working with the sector to advise and support protocols that will minimize risk of infection to both clients and staff.

A dedicated health care provider phone line supports health care providers in providing advice and latest recommendations around COVID-19.

Approximately 5 FTE currently support the health care and social services sector within the Emergency Operations Centre, all redeployed from normal public health work.

3. **Supporting Schools & Child Care.** A new call line has been created to support schools, teachers, staff, and child care operators with keeping children safe in their reopening's. Supporting these sectors is a priority in terms of protecting vulnerable children as well as older staff who may work in these settings and are at risk of severe illness. However, it is also a priority given the potential for children to spread infections through families and through the large populations in schools which could trigger a second wave. As well, successful reopening of schools and child care is critical for our economic recovery to enable parents to return to work. This is a particular equity issue for women given the disproportionate role women play in child care. Approximately 40 staff, including the 20 new provincially-funded hires are supporting schools and child care.

Since the reopening of schools, the school health team has

- Managed over 1000 clients who are cases or contacts of COVID-19 and associated with a school
- Provided 350 consultations to schools
- Provided, on average, 5 engagements with each school
- Conducted, on average, 4 in-person visits a week to schools in Niagara to do proactive infection prevention work
- Supported 145 school staff with virtual professional development around preventing COVID-19
- Provided resources that have been accessed over 10,000 times (on-line or in hard copy) by school staff or school boards.

4. **Public Messaging.** Given the rapidly changing landscape of COVID-19. Public Health seeks to provide the public with the information to address their fears and concerns, as well as to understand their risk and how to protect themselves. These efforts include a comprehensive web site library of frequently asked questions, an information phone line to speak to a health professional that operates 09:15 to 20:30 on weekdays and 09:15 on 16:15 on weekends, an online chat service with health professionals that operates during the same hours, social media, and approximately 15 media requests per week. Daily, Public Health has over 20,000 interactions with the public across all channels.

Due to recent increase in cases for COVID-19 as well as pressures for mass immunization, Public Health reduced staff available for the informational phone line and online chat, to increase more staff in case and contact management. There will also be a reduction of the hours of the call centre, so that it closes at 16:15; as well, the call centre no longer operates on weekends. With these changes, wait times for callers are unfortunately increasing. Public Health is looking at options to outsource this work.

Approximately 10 staff have been redeployed from usual public health operations to support the Emergency Operations Centre with public messaging. Having a dedicated team of public health professionals specialized in communications and engagement has been invaluable to managing the volume and scientific content of messaging needed through the pandemic. Some regions without dedicated teams have needed to build them with redeployments during the pandemic, a challenge that Niagara did not have.

5. **Vaccination.** Since the start of the pandemic, work has been underway to update and adapt off-the-shelf mass vaccination plans to the current situation. Plans are near complete, and dependent on information on vaccine distribution to finalize and allow execution to begin.

Early parts of the plan, in terms of mobile teams, have already been mobilized to vaccinate in long-term care homes, retirement homes, and congregate care setting with the limited volume of vaccine available.

Public Health has now launched mass immunization clinics. As of late April, clinics are vaccinating up to 1600 persons a day. The goal is to continue to scale this volume up over time to several thousand a day as more staff are hired and trained, and more vaccine supply becomes available.

In addition to these lines of work, there is significant work around data entry, customizing data systems and process management to make the above three lines of work as efficient and effective as possible. As well, there are comprehensive planning teams, logistics teams, a finance and administration team, and liaison activities. Approximately 45 staff have been reallocated to these activities.

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Due to the pressures of mass immunization efforts, quickly growing numbers of cases and outbreaks, and poor retention of staff in case/outbreak/contact management, Public Health is again unable to conduct full contact tracing on all new cases and has significantly curtailed follow-up.
- As cases of COVID-19 decrease, Public Health will resume more fulsome contact tracing in a phased approach, calibrated by capacity and risk.

3 months

~~There is a strong possibility of a third lockdown which would bring cases back to a manageable level. Alternately, with the pressure to staff expanding vaccination activities, staff available for case and contact management are decreasing, and will no longer be able to actively control the pandemic in Niagara.~~

3 months to 6 months

- Projections on operations in the future will depend on Provincial government policy decisions around COVID-19 response and the speed at which vaccines become available. The expectation is that current emergency operations would continue with emphasis shifting based on provincial response and expected high vaccine roll-out which will control the pandemic. The emergence of new variants that could be vaccine-resistant however threaten this outcome.

Clinical Services Division (Excluding Mental Health)

Current State of Operations

Most efforts in this area normally focus on infectious disease prevention. Many staff (60 FTE of 84 total) have been reallocated to the Emergency Operations Centre for COVID-19 response. Current operations are focused on

- case and contact management of sexually transmitted infections
- case and contact management of significant infectious diseases (e.g. tuberculosis, measles)
- distributing provincial vaccination stockpiles to primary care
- advising primary care around complex immunization scenarios
- emergency contraception
- outreach to marginalized populations around vaccination and sexual health

Services/Operational Changes

- Cessation of immunization clinics
- Cessation of school vaccinations
- Cessation of enforcing the *Immunization of School Pupils Act*
- Cessation of supplying the public with immunization records
- Cessation of sexual health clinics
- Cessation of health promotion around vaccinations
- Cessation of health promotion around healthy sexuality

With the current state of COVID-19 cases and the ramping up of COVID-19 vaccinations, it is very unlikely any school vaccinations will take place this year.

Operational Outlook

1 month & 3 months

- Increasing staff investigating adverse events following immunization since these will surge as vaccines are rolled out.

Mental Health

Current State of Operations

Mental Health supports clients in the community who would often otherwise need to be hospitalized. This work is critical to keep people out of the hospital and ensure health system capacity for those with COVID-19. As well, given current challenges around loss of employment, anxiety, and social isolation, delivery of mental health services is more important than ever. With the resurgence of COVID-19, some staff have again been redeployed to the COVID-19 response, affecting waiting times for Mental Health

services. Two staff returned to Mental Health have once again been reassigned to pandemic response.

Services/Operational Changes

- Shift of some in-person clinics to remote delivery
- Reduction in some volume of work to shift 6 FTE to provide mental health case management in shelters.

Operational Outlook

- With the resurgence of COVID-19, staff have been redeployed to COVID-19 response, and likely will remain redeployed for several more weeks.
- Mental Health services are expected to continue to have long waiting times given loss of staff to COVID-19 response.

Environmental Health

Current State of Operations

Several lines of inspection that were discontinued due to closures of certain sectors (e.g. food services, personal services, recreational pools) have resumed as those sectors reopen. In addition, other sectors of inspection remain more important than ever (e.g. infection control inspections of long term care homes and retirement homes). No staff remain completely deployed to support Emergency Operations. However, almost all staff are supporting emergency operations in their home program by inspecting COVID-19 prevention measures as part of their normal inspection work, or taking on roles around non-COVID-19 infection prevention normally done by staff redeployed to Emergency Operations. For early October, 1 staff person has been formally redeployed to emergency operations. Currently staff focus upon

- Investigation of animal bites for rabies prevention
- Investigation of health hazards
- Foodborne illness complaints
- Food premises complaints
- Infection prevention and control lapse investigations
- Inspection of reopened food premises
- Inspection of housing and infection prevention amongst temporary foreign workers

- Support and advice to private drinking water and small drinking water system operators
- Inspection of reopened recreational water establishments
- Inspection of reopened personal services settings
- Surveillance and prevention of West Nile Virus, Lyme Disease, and other vector borne diseases
- Investigation of adverse water quality
- Supporting businesses and other partners with infection prevention and control, especially as many businesses move to re-open
- Supporting operators with other unique health risks from resuming after a period of extended closure, such as flushing and managing stale water in pipes

Services/Operational Changes

- Increase of infection control investigations of long term care facilities and retirement homes
- Simulations of outbreaks with long term care facilities and retirement homes to increase their preparedness for outbreaks have now been discontinued
- Refocusing infection control investigations of day cares to focus on very frequent inspection of those that remain operational
- Inspections conducted as part of COVID-19 case and outbreak investigations in workplaces and public settings

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Environmental Health staff will be supporting mass immunization efforts as well as providing additional support to outbreak prevention.

3 month & 6 month

- Projections on operations in the future will depend on Provincial government policy decisions around COVID-19 response.

Chronic Disease & Injury Prevention

Current State of Operations

Chronic illnesses are responsible for 70% of ill health and lead to more deaths (75,000 deaths per year in Ontario) than are likely to be caused by COVID-10 (Ontario government projects 3,000 to 15,000 deaths from COVID-19). Chronic diseases are heavily exacerbated during this period of social restrictions. As well, since chronic disease make one more likely to suffer severe illness from COVID-19, mitigating chronic diseases remains a high priority.

Efforts are being consolidated around three areas:

1. Mental health promotion. This reflects the greater risk of persons suffering mental health challenges including suicide during this time.
2. Substance use prevention. This reflects the risk of greater substance use while people are unemployed and lack other means of recreation.
3. Health eating and physical activity. The goal is to ensure physical activity despite current social restrictions, and support healthy eating when mostly fast food is available to purchase for take-out.

The above three priorities align with the underlying causes of most ill health and most deaths in Canada. In order to support COVID-19 vaccinations, some staff have been redeployed to support data management around vaccinations. Of 35 staff, 24 remain in their role supporting work on these health issues. ~~However, on a temporary basis, 19 additional staff have been redeployed to support mass immunization while hiring and training takes place to fill critical immunization support roles.~~

Services/Operational Changes

- Consolidation of resources around the previously mentioned three priorities
- Elimination of engagement of populations in-person
- Elimination of activities in schools, workplaces, and other public settings
- Cessation of most cancer prevention work
- Cessation of most healthy aging work
- Cessation of most injury prevention work
- Expansion of role of Tobacco Control Officers to also enforce Provincial emergency orders around physical distancing

Operational Outlook

1 month

- ~~Almost all chronic disease prevention work is suspended while staff are temporarily redeployed to fill mass immunization support roles, until new employees can be hired and trained.~~
- Temporary redeployments of staff to support mass immunization have ended, and staff are returning to addressing the increase in chronic diseases as a consequence of the pandemic.

3 month & 6 month

- Resumption of workshops for smoking cessation
- Roll-out of major suicide-prevention initiatives
- Projections on operations in the future will depend on Provincial government policy decisions around COVID-19 response. Loosening of social restrictions will enable delivery of programming with more direct engagement.

Family Health

Current State of Operations

There continues to be redeployment of 79 of 144 staff in Family Health to support Emergency Operations. As well, 20 school health staff while not formally redeployed, work overwhelmingly in COVID-19 response. In addition, most staff working in normal assignments are managing the exacerbated harms from the pandemic on other health issues.

Families in Niagara are burdened now more than ever to try to provide safe and healthy care, environments and opportunities for children. The Family Health division continues to provide essential services for families with a small number of staff. Limited services are provided by phone, live chat and virtual access to nurses through Niagara Parents where families can seek support with breastfeeding, parenting, pregnancy, postpartum mental health and child health issues.

Efforts are now underway to plan with schools on how school health programming may be delivered this fall. The Healthy Babies Healthy Children program has begun transitioning back to in-person visits with physical distance to better support families, as

well as in-person screening in the hospitals. The Nurse Family Partnership has also been able to transition to mostly in-person visits using physical distance having maintained visiting at pre-COVID levels for the prior 3 months with more virtual visits.

As of April 2021, limited dental services for those at highest risk has been able to resume.

Staff are focusing their efforts on the following areas:

- Prenatal/postnatal support
- Supporting vulnerable families
- Parenting supports
- Providing enrollment and information towards emergency dental care

Home visiting programs for some of our most vulnerable families are also offering virtual support to assist with

- adjusting to life with a new baby,
- addressing parenting concerns,
- promoting healthy child development,
- accessing other supports and services as they are available, and
- assessing for increased risk related to child protection

Services/Operational Changes

- Cessation of dental screening
- ~~Cessation of dental services~~
- Cessation of breastfeeding clinics
- Cessation of well baby clinics
- Shifting all prenatal/postnatal support to virtual options from in-person service
- Shifting home visits to remote connections

For the period of March 16, 2020 to April 17, 2021:

- 852 registrants for online prenatal education
- 4009 HBHC postpartum screens and assessments completed by PHN
- 2527 HBHC home visits
- 1223 Nurse Family Partnership visits
- 797 Infant Child Development service visits
- 1092 Breastfeeding outreach visits

- 3261 interactions with Niagara Parents (phone, live chat, and email)
- 273 moms received support and skill building through our cognitive behavioural therapy post-partum depression group
- 241 visits to families receiving support and skill building through our Triple P Individualized Parent Coaching

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Resumption of additional support for vulnerable families

3 month & 6 month

- Future operations will depend on Provincial policy decisions around COVID-19 response. Loosening of social restrictions will enable delivery of programming with more direct engagement.
- Breastfeeding clinics may resume in the winter.
- Resumption of dental clinics and fluoride varnish administration is also being planned for the winter.
- Positive Parenting Program being planned for resumption in the fall. There has been high uptake to virtual class options.

Organizational and Foundational Standards

Current State of Operations

Organizational and Foundational Standards supports the data analytics, program evaluation, quality improvement, professional development, communications, engagement, and customer services activities of Public Health. There has been redeployment of 34 of 39 staff to Emergency Operations. Ongoing activity includes

- Opioid surveillance reporting
- Active screening of staff at Regional buildings
- Managing data governance and privacy issues

Services/Operational Changes

- Cessation of public health surveillance work
- Cessation of most public health communications and engagement work

- Cessation of public health data analytics
- Cessation of expanded implementation of electronic medical record system
- Cessation of all public health quality improvement work
- Cessation of Public health applied research
- Cessation of evaluating public health programs
- Cessation of public reception service in Public Health buildings
- Scaling back data governance initiative

Operational Outlook

- Expectation is that resources will remain reallocated to Emergency Operations for at least 6 months.

Emergency Medical Services

Current State of Operations

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) continues to dispatch land ambulance services to the population calling 911, as well as modified non-ambulance response to 911 calls as appropriate (the System Transformation Project). At present, call volumes have returned to expected values and operational response is normal. EMS has moved from the Monitoring stage of their Pandemic Protocol back to the Awareness stage following the recent increase in COVID-19 cases and the impact on resources. EMS is experiencing many staff in all areas of EMS operations needing to self-isolate due to family testing requiring business continuity procedures to be enacted. EMS continues to face pressures around personal protective equipment procurement as global shortages continue.

Services/Operational Changes

- Providing enhanced community support through COVID-19 specific programs (refer to PHD 05-2020 for additional details)
- Additional requests by the Province for EMS to supplement community support through enhanced Mobile Integrated Health services – 100% funding for any new initiatives approved by the LHIN

Operational Outlook

1 month

The Pandemic Plan for response prioritization remains in place. This is a unique plan to Niagara, enabled by Niagara's local control and tight integration of both ambulance dispatch and the land ambulance services.

3 month & 6 month

- Projections on operations in the future will depend on Provincial government policy decisions around COVID-19 response, and the subsequent circulation of COVID-19 in the population. Higher COVID-19 circulation would create demand for more calls to 911 as well as increase risk for EMS staff who must be off work due to COVID-19 infection or exposure. As 911 calls increase and/or staff are unable to work, the Pandemic Plan will prioritize which calls continue to be served, and which 911 calls receive a modified response (e.g. phone call and advice from a nurse) or no response.

Emergency Management

Current State of Operations

Emergency Management is currently fully deployed to supporting the Regional Emergency Operations Centre and advising the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre. Emergency Management is also deeply engaged with supporting emergency operations teams at the local area municipalities, as well as other key stakeholders (e.g. Niagara Regional Police, fire services, Canadian Forces). The CBNRE team has also been supporting emergency operations part time. Paramedics are also assisting with staffing the shelter system.

Services/Operational Changes

- Cessation of preparedness activities to focus fully on current response to COVID-19.
- A mid-response review is being conducted by staff to assess the functionality and effectiveness of emergency management coordination internally and with external stakeholders, primarily LAM EOC's to identify what is/has worked well and opportunities to improve emergency management coordination as the emergency continues

Operational Outlook

Ongoing support of current Emergency Operations Centres and recovery planning efforts. There are some elements of recovery planning that are being implemented.

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