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## MEMORANDUM

**COM-C 15-2020**

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

**Date:** May 12, 2020

**To:** Public Health and Social Services Committee

**From:** Adrienne Jugley, Commissioner, Community Services

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This memo provides details of the measures Community Services has taken to ensure continued 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

Seniors Services continues to implement known best practices, directives and all public health and outbreak measures to ensure the safety of our long-term care (LTC) home residents and staff. Seniors Services has also implemented communication plans for residents so they can continue to interact with family members and provide updates on care whenever possible.

In accordance with provincial directives, all LTC home residents and staff are being tested for COVID-19. The positive cases in our homes did not have any further transmission.

COVID-19 testing (at May 4, 2020)	Staff	Residents
Number of Tests Administered	255	211
Positive Results	4 (3 travel related)	1
Negative Results	222	180
Pending Results	31	30

During the month of April, within our long-term care homes:

- 6,250 resident / family connections were facilitated by staff through Skype, FaceTime, and telephone calls
- 54,065 resident and 40,800 staff screens (at entry) were completed
- An estimated 76,800 masks were used in the LTC homes.

Forty-one Seniors Services staff and 32 staff from other Regional divisions have been redeployed into our long-term care homes. All redeployed staff are provided with appropriate training prior to starting in their new roles and PPE to ensure their safety.

### **Outreach Services**

Seniors Services also provides outreach services in the community. To ensure supports are available for at-risk seniors during the pandemic, Niagara Region has partnered with local community agencies to enhance the Niagara Gatekeepers program. Services available include weekly, friendly telephone calls to check-in with seniors; providing access to groceries, meals and medications; ensuring transportation is available for urgent medical appointments; and, supporting access to financial entitlements.

In the month of April, the Niagara Gatekeepers phone line received 119 calls (six times increase over April 2019). Of the 119 calls received:

- 49 resulted in referrals to Seniors Community Programs
- 20 of these referrals were specific to COVID-19 related supports.

Outreach staff also made 986 phone calls from March 16 to March 31, 2020 to offer supports including ongoing wellness checks for all active or pending clients/care partners across Seniors Community Programs.

### **Homelessness Services & Community Engagement**

Homelessness Services continues to work with community partners, Niagara Region Public Health, REACH (Regional Essential Access to Connected Health) Niagara and emergency shelter providers, to enhance efforts targeted towards the prevention and mitigation of COVID-19 within the homeless population.

- In addition to regular shelter supports, one emergency shelter provider has been designated to operate a shelter exclusively for clients who would be especially vulnerable to COVID-19, due to significant chronic health conditions or age.

- To increase safety and reduce risk in all of Niagara's shelters, emergency shelter clients are being screened for respiratory symptoms at intake and twice daily after admission.
- Emergency shelter staff are also screened when presenting for their shift.
- Homelessness Services has provided supplies to support the screening process (e.g., surgical masks, a smartphone, etc.) and regularly updates screening tools.

### **Self-Isolation Facility for Emergency Shelter Clients**

Currently, the self-isolation facility run by Homelessness Services, has the staffing capacity for 28 rooms. Recruitment is underway to increase staffing in order to accommodate the potential capacity of 60 rooms. This is being done to support the regular shelter system as they screen individuals for any indication of illness or respiratory symptoms and prepare for community spread among individuals experiencing homelessness, as well as continue providing support to homeless individuals.

- If Public Health directs a client experiencing homelessness to self-isolate and be tested, the client is accommodated in the self-isolation facility.
- Partnerships are in place with McMaster family medicine residents to support shelter assessment and client health monitoring, and with Niagara Region's Emergency Medical Services (EMS) to support the swabbing of clients at the self-isolation facility.
- 47 individuals have stayed at the self-isolation facility and have been tested for COVID-19.
- There have been no positive test results to date and most individuals have returned to their referring emergency shelter.
- Case management supports available at the self-isolation facilities have resulted in seven individuals moving into transitional or permanent housing, and five individuals receiving continued addiction/mental health support post-discharge to support their goals and case plan.

### **Emergency Shelter Capacity**

In addition to the creation of the self-isolation facility, Homelessness Services has continued to increase the capacity of the emergency shelter system by securing rooms at two motels to provide temporary housing for shelter system clients, support social distancing, and reduce transmission of COVID-19.

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Regular Shelter Capacity	Current Shelter Capacity (with measures for COVID-19 in place)	Planned Shelter Capacity
187 beds	240 beds	272 beds

### **Assertive Street Outreach Program**

Based on the experiences of H1N1, homeless clients may choose to avoid shelters, to address safety and social distancing in a pandemic. With that in mind, twice as many assertive street outreach workers are being deployed at this time, supporting unsheltered homeless clients (April 2019 5 FTE vs. April 2020 10 FTE). With the support of the City of St. Catharines, three of the additional street outreach workers are focused on activities for that specific city.

Assertive street outreach staff, in collaboration with Public Health, are performing COVID-19 screening with clients. If a client requires self-isolation they are referred to the self-isolation facility.

### **Additional Impacts of COVID-19 on Niagara Emergency Energy Fund and Housing Stability Plan Benefits**

Due to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Homelessness Services is anticipating there will be an increase in requests for the Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) and Housing Stability Plan benefits once utility disconnections and evictions due to rental arrears resume. It is hoped that the additional funding from the province, assuming that it is not entirely exhausted by the above-mentioned investments, can also assist with some of these homelessness prevention costs.

### **Children's Services**

Based on provincial direction, four of the five Regional child care centres were opened to operate as emergency child care centres to support health care and frontline essential workers (Niagara Falls, Fort Erie, Welland and St. Catharines). Niagara Region's licensed home child care service and Wee Watch home child care are also operating to deliver emergency child care. The following demographics are reflective of our service level at April 30, 2020.

## **Demographics of Families and Children Accessing Emergency Child Care**

There were 75 families accessing emergency child care through both our Regional child care and home child care settings:

- 30 families (40%) work in health care within a hospital setting
- 19 families (25%) work in health care within a long-term care home
- 8 families (11%) work in police or corrections
- 8 families (11%) are Regional employees working mostly in public health
- 3 families (4%) are paramedics / EMTs
- 7 families (9%) work in pharmacies, postal services, shelters, etc.

The 74 children attending the four Regionally operated child care centers were represented as follows:

- 33 (45%) are preschool aged
- 31 (42%) are school aged
- 8 (11%) are toddlers
- 2 (3%) are infants

## **Available Child Care Spaces and Operating Capacity**

There were 173 emergency child care spaces available across the four child care centres and home child care programs. One hundred and sixteen of these spaces were filled, with 57 spaces remaining. The child care centres and the home child care programs were operating at a total capacity of 67%.

## **Social Assistance - Ontario Works**

Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities (SAEO) continues to provide essential support to Ontario Works clients, and process new applications. In the month of April, SAEO processed 1,187 COVID-19 related benefits and transitioned over 1,000 clients from receiving paper cheques to direct deposit or a reloadable payment card.

The provincial government increased access to discretionary benefits for social assistance recipients who are in crisis or who are facing an unexpected emergency because of COVID-19. The discretionary benefit is a monthly payment of \$100 for individuals and \$200 per couple/family, and is being provided for up to three months (May, June and July 2020). Applications for Ontario Works, emergency assistance and discretionary benefits have increased significantly and new applications are processed within four business days.

## Number of Requests for Ontario Works

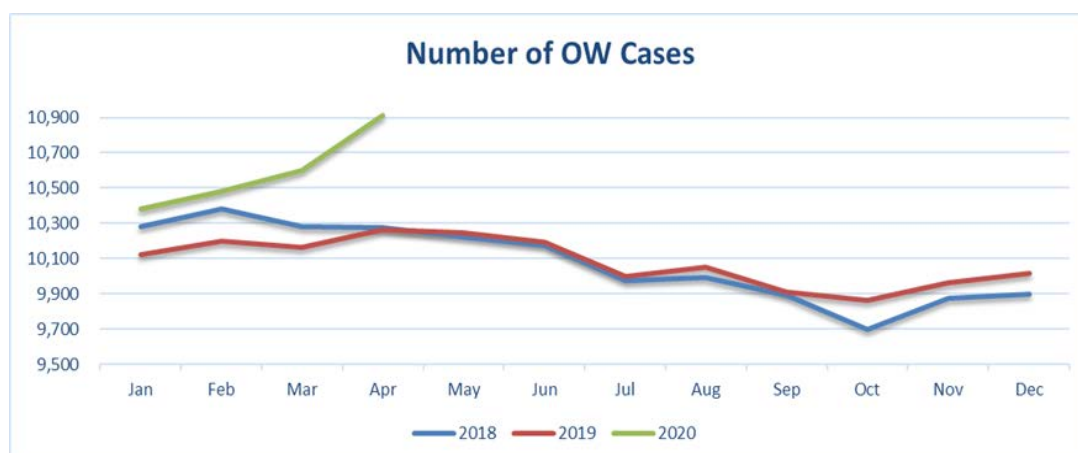
In March 2020, SAEO experienced a 51% increase in requests for Ontario Works. Since the introduction of the Federal Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB) in April, the requests for Ontario Works have stabilized to pre-pandemic levels.



## Caseload Increase for Ontario Works

At January 1, 2020, Niagara's Ontario Works caseload was 10,000. At April 30, 2020, the caseload had risen to 10,900, indicating a 9% increase in caseload, but it is largely due to a reduction in the number of people exiting social assistance to employment, rather than a significant change in the rate of new applications.

Comparing the months of March and April of 2019 and March and April of 2020, there has been a -24% decrease in the number of cases that have been terminated.



## **Niagara Regional Housing**

Niagara Regional Housing (NRH) continues to provide essential services in all business streams while undertaking necessary safety precautions and protocols. Applications are being processed, emergency repairs completed, and additional supports are being provided to tenants, members, landlords and housing providers. NRH continues to provide frequent communication with stakeholders, and directs both tenants and housing providers to the Public Health website and telephone lines to obtain real time information on COVID-19. NRH continues to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on NRH rents and arrears balances.

Community Programs Coordinators (CPCs) have been contacting vulnerable tenants to offer specialized supports and Housing Operations staff have contacted tenants who are not as vulnerable and are making referrals to CPCs as necessary.

The RAFT and Faith Welland delivered 896 care packages to support NRH communities that would normally participate in after school programming. The packages include snacks and activities aimed at engaging tenants in family activities.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE  
Commissioner