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**MEMORANDUM**

COM-C 19-2020

**Subject:** COVID-19 Response and Business Continuity in Community Services  
**Date:** June 16, 2020  
**To:** Public Health & 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**

**Current Status of Operations/Changes**

All eight Regional long-term care (LTC) homes have taken the necessary steps to ensure the timely implementation of all directives issued by the Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Long Term Care and Public Health.

At each LTC home, all risk mitigation strategies put in place at the onset of the pandemic to ensure continued safety for residents and staff are still ongoing. Enhanced staffing levels (largely achieved through staff redeployment) continue to be maintained to ensure optimal infection prevention and control practices, ongoing communication support for residents and families, and continued care and services for residents.

**Significant Initiatives or Actions undertaken**

- Seniors Services has suspended regular visitation and non-essential services (yet still accommodating for exceptions and end of life visits), into LTC homes as a continued disease transmission prevention measure.
- Active staff screening is ongoing. Staff are screened when entering and leaving a LTC home, including temperature checks.
- At this time, all staff continue to be limited to only working at a single LTC home.
- All staff in an LTC home are required to wear a surgical mask while they are at work. When staff provide care for a resident that is in isolation they wear a mask

(either a surgical mask or an N95 mask depending on the type of care that is required), a gown, gloves, and a face shield. All LTC homes have sufficient supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to ensure that staff are well equipped.

- All staff have been provided with training and updates on respiratory outbreak management, hand hygiene, PPE and on all aspects of COVID-19 and related care and risk management implications.
- Regional staff that have been redeployed into LTC homes have been providing a variety of supports including active screening of staff, communication supports, enhanced dietary supports, and housekeeping and laundry supports.
- Residents are given assessments twice daily, including temperature checks. If a resident presents with a symptom of COVID-19 they are isolated and tested.
- If a resident is transferred into a LTC home from either a hospital or from the community, they are isolated for 14 days as a precautionary measure.
- All residents and staff completed the COVID-19 surveillance testing in May and all staff will continue to be tested every two weeks.
- Dining and lounge areas within the LTC homes have been reorganized to support physical distancing.
- Enhanced environmental cleaning continues. More housekeeping shifts have been added to increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting of high-touch surfaces.
- Communication plans have been developed to ensure residents have continued interaction with friends and family (through phone calls, Skype or FaceTime).

### **Operational Outlook**

LTC homes are developing recovery plans to support the re-introduction of resident and family visits and to accommodate non-essential services (e.g. foot care services).

Homes are also reviewing and revising business continuity plans to ensure preparedness for a potential second wave of COVID-19.

### **Seniors Services – Outreach Services**

#### **Current Status of Operations/Changes**

- Seniors Community Programs, largely funded by Ontario Health, continue to provide wellness and outreach supports to vulnerable seniors in the community.
- Services have been reconfigured to support staff to address emerging service needs while ensuring adherence to Public Health guidance and restrictions.
- Assisted living at Deer Park Suites continues to operate following Public Health direction, in addition to adopting many of the LTC home best practices. In

accordance with MOH and Public Health direction, all Regional seniors community programs that require seniors to gather within group settings have been suspended (e.g. Adult Day Programs, wellness programs, community exercise groups). Program staff have been redeployed to the LTC homes and Deer Park Suites Assisted Living. These staff are providing supports to enhance communication between residents and families, as well as mealtime supports.

- Outreach and Respite Services are operating under a modified service delivery model to offer telephone visits as the primary method of service coordination. With Outreach, direct interactive door visits have been made available on an essential need basis, only with appropriate PPE and physical distancing measures in place.

### **Significant Initiatives or Actions undertaken**

- Respite Companion Services have shifted from providing in-home services to telephone supports. Screened and trained respite companions have been leveraged to support wellness checks generated through the 'Niagara, We're In This Together' community campaign to enable rapid mobilization of telephone interactions.
- Outreach and Respite Program staff have been instrumental in two community launches to mitigate the some of the negative impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable seniors:
  1. 'Niagara, We're in This Together' is a multi-agency community collaboration to address essential needs of vulnerable seniors across Niagara. Community workers are responding to community needs through wellness checks that look for opportunities to connect seniors with new ways of addressing essential needs. This includes on-line grocery orders, grocery delivery services, meal services, essential transportation access and medication access. Additionally, the wellness checks provide reassurance to those seniors who may be feeling isolated due to pandemic restrictions.
  2. The Niagara Gatekeepers program re-launched an awareness campaign highlighting its role and phone number. This phone line has been used more recently to provide supports and connection to at-risk seniors who may face food insecurity, require supports with access to medication and other essential needs, and transportation to essential appointments, as a result of the pandemic.

### **Operational Outlook**

- Seniors Services is looking to mobilize a virtual platform for Healthy, Safe and Strong Exercise programs that will be available for registration in August, with the goal of implementing the program in September.

- Seniors Services is exploring opportunities to introduce a blended model of Adult Day Programs that incorporates both small group direct interaction (with appropriate PPE and physical distancing measures) and virtual support.
- For clients with access to technology, Seniors Services is looking to provide links to wellness topics, exercise, and brain health through distribution of online newsletters.
- For clients without access to technology, Seniors Services is planning to provide phone visits, monthly activity drop off kits, phone check-ins to discuss how activities are going and identify what services and supports clients require.
- Staff are currently planning for a return to in-home visits for the next phase of the pandemic. Currently, Seniors Services are enquiring if clients have interest in opening their homes to direct interactions with staff during the next phase. Seniors Services is also determining the technological capacity to support a blended model that incorporates both direct and indirect (virtual/phone) service provision that allows for observational visits. PPE requirements, availability of PPE supply, and staff guidance documents are being prepared to support safety and well-being of both staff and clients who will be receiving the service.
- Information on safety, infection control, PPE use and training is being documented and made available for staff. This is also to ensure preparedness for a potential second wave of COVID-19.
- Applications for the federal Emergency Community Support Fund (ECSF) are being prepared to support development of virtual service delivery within Seniors Community Programs. The ECSF is intended to support community organizations that are providing services to vulnerable populations during the pandemic. The funding is disbursed through United Way Centraide Canada, the Canadian Red Cross and Community Foundations of Canada.

## **Homelessness Services & Community Engagement**

### **Current Status of Operations/Changes**

- Homelessness Services continues to operate the full emergency shelter system, along with the addition of up to 25 overflow hotel rooms to further support physical distancing and mitigate COVID-19 transmission within the homeless population.
- Additionally, the self-isolation facility, established by Homelessness Services, continues to operate and ensure that all homeless persons who screen with symptoms associated with COVID-19, are provided a space in which to self-isolate and receive testing. As of June 3, 2020, 108 individuals have been referred to the facility and testing results received, to date, have been negative.

- Street outreach services remain enhanced to support those living in encampments or 'living rough', and address the volume of associated requests for services from local area municipalities. Outreach workers continue to ensure that individuals who are living rough are provided with access to services and opportunities based on COVID-19 screening and assessments of health.
- Housing First and Home for Good supportive housing and transitional housing offerings all continue to operate.
- Prevention programs continue to be offered to clients including trusteeship and housing help.
- A mapping tool has been developed to support outreach services in locating encampments and areas where services are required.

### **Significant Initiatives or Actions undertaken**

- The housing focused shelter pilot, for clients accepted into supportive housing programs (Housing First and Home for Good programs), is a new offering to ensure clients have an appropriate environment in which to become housing ready, while also supporting individuals who may otherwise be 'living rough' (e.g., in encampments and within the shelter system). There are up to 14 units being utilized for the housing focused shelter pilot.
- Arrangements have been made with two hotels for shelter overflow to support physical distancing in the shelter system.
- One shelter provider has converted their hotel based shelter service into a program exclusively for clients who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 (e.g., due to age, health condition). This is to ensure these clients have access to a safe space, separate from the regular emergency (congregate facility) shelter system.
- In partnership with Reach Niagara, virtual medical supports to homeless shelters and the self-isolation facility continue and have been enhanced. Currently there are seven facilities receiving medical supports from physicians enrolled in the Niagara family medicine residency program, with oversight from a local physician. This support includes secondary screening for COVID-19, supports with medical needs such as addictions and mental health, health care activities such as access to medication, prescription management and client health checks.

### **Operational Outlook**

- The regular shelter system remained at a high occupancy rate of 98.2% for the months of April and May, even with the additional hotel units. It is anticipated that the

additional shelter capacity created to support the homeless shelter system will need to be retained during the course of the pandemic to ensure physical distancing can be sustained, and support the safety of staff and clients.

- Experience during the H1N1 pandemic and current observation suggests that some clients will continue to choose to 'live rough' during the pandemic due to their desire to avoid the shelter system, and therefore the enhanced outreach services will need to be sustained through the course of the pandemic to provide health screening and access to supports.
- Staff believe that the self-isolation facility will be a necessary resource to the vulnerable homeless population throughout the pandemic to ensure identified individuals have a place to self-isolate, be tested and supported when experiencing COVID-19 symptoms or illness.

## **Children's Services**

### **Current Status of Operations/Changes**

Four of the five Regional child care centres continue to provide emergency child care for essential workers (free of charge), as directed by the provincial government. Niagara's two licensed home child care agencies also continue to operate, with increasing capacity as some contracted home child care providers have reopened their services. One external child care service provider, Church of St. Thomas Day Care, has recently opened as an emergency child care centre.

With the recent announcement that schools will stay closed for the remainder of the school year, more applications for emergency child care have been received. As of June 3, 2020, the overall operational capacity (for both Regional child care centres and home child care) is at 84% of 219 total spaces.

- Children's services has been advised that many local summer day camps will not be operating and this is anticipated to lead to increased pressure on the child care system, as parents returning to work seeking care arrangements, will have limited options.
- To date, the provincial government has not announced the reopening of licensed child care centres for the general public but staff are preparing for the possible opening of licensed child care this summer.
- The number of child care centres that will reopen and the number of families who will utilize child care spaces when the centres open are unknown at this time.

### **Significant Initiatives or Actions undertaken**

- Children's Services has hosted a number of teleconferences with licensed child care service providers, EarlyON Child and Family Centres, special needs agencies and school boards to share information, answer questions, and direct providers to resources.
- Based on the experiences gained from operating emergency child care centres, Children's Services has shared all documents and resources available outlining new procedures, policies and operational guidelines with service providers. This is intended to help service providers begin to prepare plans for reopening operations under new requirements due to COVID-19.
- A new temporary committee with Regional staff was created to specifically address health and safety concerns for service providers. This committee will provide guidance, resources, and seek to address any questions or concerns as the system prepares to re-open.

### **Operational Outlook**

- At the time of this report, Children's Services is waiting for further direction from the Ministry of Education regarding a reopening timeline, and operating guidelines.
- Through its membership with the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, Children's Services is advocating for additional funding to support the operations of licensed child care during the pandemic. It is anticipated there will be additional requirements and costs for operations (e.g. staff for screening, increased cleaning and disinfecting during the day, PPE costs, reduced child staff ratios, fewer children permitted in child care classrooms). Without additional provincial funding these changes will add increased costs for parents and likely impact their ability to pay increased daily rates, and potentially create more pressures for the child care system as a whole.

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

#### **Current Status of Operations/Changes**

Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities (SAEO) continues to provide essential support to Ontario Works (OW) clients, and process new applications. New applicants have been completing their initial assessment either through an online application or by telephone. Staff members then contact applicants within four business days to complete the eligibility assessment over the telephone as the five SAEO offices

continue to be closed to the public. Monthly income supports to ongoing OW clients have not been impacted by COVID-19 and the provision of holistic case management has continued. This has included:

- Frequent phone contact with clients to complete wellness checks.
- Active offers of benefits, resources and referrals (e.g. mental health, addiction services).
- Ongoing conversations that are related to employment status and employment related activities.

For the month of May 2020, the caseload was at 10,470. This represents a 2.2% increase when compared to May of 2019. Comparing between the periods of January and May of 2019 to January and May of 2020, Ontario Works in Niagara has experienced a 3.7% caseload increase. It is not believed to be as a result of a marked increase in new cases, but rather a reflection that it is more difficult for current clients to find work and exit social assistance.

(Comparing the periods between January and May of 2019 to January and May of 2020, Ontario Works in Niagara has seen an average decrease of -24% in the number of cases that have been terminated).

- SAEO is piloting the use of a phone interpretation service to enhance customer service for clients with limited English speaking ability. The service will allow real-time interpretation between staff and the caller over the phone, in over 250 languages. Program areas in the pilot are staff from Switchboard and Intake, Homelessness and Hostel workers and Newcomer case managers.
- SAEO has redeployed 23 union and non-union staff to support other essential roles within the corporation.

### **Significant Initiatives or Actions undertaken**

- To date, SAEO has successfully transitioned 82% of the caseload to direct deposit into client bank accounts (as opposed to cheque issuances that require in person pick up or mailing). Of the remaining 18% of the caseload, 6% have been successfully transitioned to reloadable benefit payment cards.
- As of May 29, 2020, SAEO has processed 1,825 COVID-19 related benefits.
- In response to the provincial government increasing access to discretionary benefits for social assistance recipients who are in crisis or who are facing an unexpected emergency because of COVID-19, an Online Discretionary Benefits Portal was



launched to respond to increased service demands and enhance client access. The online portal was built to provide clients with a fast, easy and secure way to request Discretionary and Housing Stability benefits and is more convenient for them to access essential health related benefits. Clients can submit their application and supporting documentation online, track their application status, receive automatic email updates, find details about missing information or eligibility decisions and view the contact information for the case manager assigned to the request.

### **Operational Outlook**

- SAEO believes that the temporary financial relief measures put in place by the federal government (e.g. access to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit), will not prevent an increase in anticipated local demand for social assistance in the near future as many businesses that typically hire low income workers may be slow to recover in the next phase of the pandemic (e.g. restaurants, hotels, entertainment venues). In preparation of a potential demand increase, once these federal measures come to an end, staff are working to ensure all current cases are updated, to streamline the intake application process.
- Effective January 1, 2021, a portion of Niagara's OW Program Delivery funding allocation from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services will transfer to the Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development to support the integration of employment services. The anticipated funding reduction will require a significant response and plan to ensure the budget for 2021 is inclusive of staffing, administration and cost shared client benefits will reflect the available funding for the year. Staff are currently completing an analysis to determine the best course of action to meet the anticipated demand in service as result of COVID-19 and how to best support clients in accessing a transformed employment system.

### **Niagara Regional Housing**

#### **Current Status of Operations/Changes**

Niagara Regional Housing (NRH) wishes to share with Council that it continues to deliver essential services, in all business streams, while taking all the necessary safety precautions and protocols. Tenants continue to receive supports over the phone, in order to meet individual tenant needs, whenever possible.

- NRH is working with the Region on a Business Recovery Plan to safely resume as many on-site services (e.g., unit inspections, programs, events and activities) as possible, once regulations allow for this.
- Staff are also working on plans that will allow varying levels of supports in order to navigate through predicted changes in guidelines.

### **Significant Initiatives or Actions undertaken**

- Additional security patrols have been added to communities that are struggling with social issues and adhering to Public Health guidelines.
- NRH has added regular disinfecting of all high-touch surfaces throughout its buildings.

### **Operational Outlook**

- Community Housing has experienced a dramatic increase in social issues, disruptive behaviours and mental and physical health crises. This is due to tenants feeling the impacts of isolation in small units without access to their usual supports, programs, and activities.
- Constant and clear communication with tenants, staff and stakeholders has become more critical than ever as information changes rapidly and adjustments to services must be mobilized quickly.
- NRH continues to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on NRH rent and arrears balances.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE  
Commissioner