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**Subject:** A Unified Message for All-of-Niagara Vigilance Against COVID-19

**Report to:** Board of Health (Regional Council)

**Report date:** Thursday, June 25, 2020

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## Recommendations

1. That Regional Council, as the Board of Health, **THANKS** the people of Niagara for their sacrifice and diligence in practicing personal conduct that has “flattened the curve” of COVID-19 and enabled Niagara to move into Stage 2 of the province’s *A Framework for Reopening Our Province*;
2. That Regional Council, as the Board of Health, **RESOLVES** that as restrictions on the economy and social interaction are lifted in Niagara, it is more important than ever that everyone practices behaviours that limit the spread of infection, namely:
  - 2.1. Keeping a physical distancing of 2 metres from others
  - 2.2. Washing or sanitizing hands frequently
  - 2.3. Wearing a face covering where it is not possible to maintain a 2 metre distance
  - 2.4. Being attentive to one’s health, and isolating oneself while seeking testing if one develops any symptoms of infection, however mild;
3. That Regional Council, as the Board of Health, **REQUESTS** all leaders and influencers in Niagara to speak in a unified voice about the importance of practicing the above behaviours;
4. That Regional Council, as the Board of Health, **ENCOURAGES** all residents and visitors to Niagara to practice the above behaviours; and
5. That Regional Council, as the Board of Health, **ENCOURAGES** all businesses and services in Niagara to implement all reasonable measures that enable their clients, employees, and visitors to practice the above behaviours.

## Key Facts

- As Niagara has entered Stage 2 of the province’s *Framework to Reopen Ontario*, there will be more interaction with people who partake of business and services that can reopen, and therefore greater risk that COVID-19 will again circulate more widely.
- Other countries such as South Korea, China, and several U.S. states have seen resurgences in COVID-19 as they reopened, particularly as their populations simultaneously reduced their vigilance to personal behaviours that can limit the spread of COVID-19.
- At Public Health & Social Services Committee on June 16, several members highlighted their concern with a resurgence of infection in Niagara, and the importance of people practicing behaviours such as wearing face coverings that limit the spread of COVID-19.
- Aligned and consistent messaging by all parties is needed to “break through” the plethora of information that surrounds us, and ensure everyone understands the importance of ongoing diligence in the face of COVID-19 to prevent future surges of illness.

## Financial Considerations

There are no financial implications to this report.

## Analysis

Niagara has achieved great success in reducing the spread of COVID-19. During the peak period of the outbreak, Niagara saw 150 cases over the course of a week (April 11–17). In the most recent week (June 13–19), Niagara had only 13 new cases.

This success is attributable to multiple factors:

1. Restrictions on the US border and measures to reduce travel that have stopped the importation of infections into Niagara from abroad

2. Restrictions on business and social life, reducing interactions amongst persons and therefore reducing the ability of infection to spread
3. Intensive follow-up of cases and contact tracing by Public Health to break chains of transmission
4. Efforts by essential businesses to limit the spread of infection by measures such as controlling the number of clients in their premises, frequent disinfection, one-way flows of traffic to discourage interaction, barriers between workers and clients at check-outs, increased on-line and curbside shopping.
5. Efforts by the people of Niagara to practice behaviours that have limited the spread of infection such as staying home as much as possible, keeping 2 metre distance from persons outside of the household, washing and sanitizing hands frequently, wearing face coverings when a 2-metre distance can't be kept, and staying isolated and getting tested when feeling ill.

These measures have also incurred significant cost and sacrifice in terms of personal freedom and mental wellness, lost income, pressures on child care, risk of illness incurred by essential workers continuing to serve the people of Niagara, and economic survival of businesses amongst many others. The social and economic costs of these has been significant.

As Niagara entered Stage 2 of the Province's [A Framework for Reopening our Province](https://www.ontario.ca/page/framework-reopening-our-province-stage-2) (https://www.ontario.ca/page/framework-reopening-our-province-stage-2) on June 19, 2020, one of the five success factors listed earlier is being scaled back: restrictions on business and social life. This will lessen the most painful of the social and economic costs being experienced, but at the cost of lessening the measures in place to slow the spread of COVID-19. In order to maintain low case counts of COVID-19 in Niagara, efforts towards the remaining four success factors need to continue if not be redoubled.

At greatest risk of not continuing are the voluntary measures taken by businesses and the people of Niagara. There is understandably going to be fatigue to maintaining these measures, and continuing these practices with the same intensity will be difficult.

The experience of other countries such as China, South Korea, and the United States shows that as vigilance to such measures drops with reopening of businesses and services, COVID-19 is resurgent:

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...a resurgence of infections in the Seoul region where half of South Korea's 51 million people live is threatening the country's success story and prompting health authorities to warn that action must be taken now to stop a second wave.

...since the easing of distancing, there has been a clear erosion in citizen vigilance, which, along with the highly effective contact tracing, has been credited for allowing the country to weather the epidemic without lockdowns.

While the Health Ministry and KCDC have repeatedly urged residents in the capital area to refrain from unnecessary gatherings and other public activity, data provided by cellphone carriers, credit-card companies and mass-transport operators over the past weekend indicated that people were just as active as before.<sup>1</sup>

It is imperative that Niagara not mirror this experience and once again experience the same costs to citizens and business of restrictions on the economy and social life.

In terms of personal conduct that can limit the spread of COVID-19, the Public Health Agency of Canada advises that <sup>2</sup>

The best thing you can do to prevent spreading COVID-19 is to wash your hands frequently with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds. If none is available, use hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol.

The Agency further highlights physical distancing, particularly staying home if one is ill, as measures that are important to stop the spread of infection. Where physical distancing is not possible, wearing a face covering is a secondary measure to mitigate the risk of not keeping physical distance:

- maintain a 2-metre physical distance from others

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<sup>1</sup> "Resurgence of coronavirus infections in Seoul prompts warning from South Korean health authorities". *Globe & Mail*. June 11, 2020. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-resurgence-of-coronavirus-infections-in-seoul-prompts-warning-from/> (Accessed June 12, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> "Non-medical masks and face coverings: About". Public Health Agency of Canada. June 9, 2020. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks/about-non-medical-masks-face-coverings.html> (Accessed June 19, 2020)

- when physical distancing cannot be maintained, consider wearing a non-medical mask or homemade face covering

It should be emphasized that wearing a face covering remains a second-line preventive measures, when the preferred measures of physical distancing is not possible. Physical distancing has stronger and consistent evidence to support it. The evidence for face coverings is much weaker and conflicting, even though over the course of the pandemic, the research has begun to lean more favourably to the benefits of wearing face coverings.

A recent systematic review and meta-analysis published in *The Lancet* on June 1, 2020 examined the scientific evidence for these two measures. This kind of research study is considered one of the highest forms of scientific evidence as it combines the findings of the best research available to determine the overall impact. This study concluded with “moderate certainty” that physical distancing reduces the spread of COVID-19. It also concluded that face masks “could result” in reducing risk of infection, but only with “low certainty”.<sup>3</sup>

Ontario’s scientific agency for public health, Public Health Ontario, published a summary and synthesis of research on face coverings on June 4, 2020. This summary highlights the many studies showing face coverings as ineffective or harmful, as well as more recent studies no showing some benefit to face coverings. Overall, it concludes<sup>4</sup>

- The majority of studies have not demonstrated benefit in cluster randomized controlled trials evaluating the effect of members of the general public wearing masks in non-healthcare settings to prevent the acquisition of viral respiratory infections.

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<sup>3</sup> DK Chu, EA Aki, S Duda, K Solo, S Yaacoub, HJ Schünemann. “Physical distancing, face masks, and eye protection to prevent person-to-person transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19: a systematic review and meta-analysis”. *The Lancet*. June 1, 2020. DOI:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31142-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31142-9)

<sup>4</sup> Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). 2019-nCoV – What We Know So Far About...Wearing Masks in Public. Toronto, ON: Queen’s Printer for Ontario; 2020.

- If masks are not used appropriately, and not combined with meticulous hand hygiene, there is a theoretical risk of increased infection risk through self-contamination.
- Recommending indiscriminate public wearing of medical masks may result in additional critical shortages of masks needed to protect front-line healthcare workers, and any potential benefits of mask wearing are likely less impactful than physical distancing and hand hygiene.

Balancing this potential benefit with uncertain scientific evidence, the Public Health Agency of Canada recommend face coverings be used, but in a limited fashion: as a mitigation measures when physical distancing is not possible, but not universally.

In addition to these personal behaviours that can limit the spread of COVID-19, one other element of personal contact can support another success factor: getting tested for COVID-19 which enables case management and contact tracing efforts by local public health. Continuing the message the importance of anyone with mild symptoms getting tested will ensure cases of COVID-19 are not missed, and stopping chains of transmission can be maximised.

Through the diligence of citizens and businesses practicing an enabling these behaviours (physical distancing, hand washing/sanitizing, wearing face coverings where distancing is not possible, isolating and getting tested when one has symptoms of illness), Niagara will stand the best chance of successfully reopening the economy and resuming social life, with only limited impact on COVID-19 spread. An All-of-Niagara effort by opinion leaders and influencers to promote these behaviours is recommended to realize this potential.

### **Alternatives Reviewed**

Not speaking in a unified voice across Niagara will lessen the ability of the message to reach and influence residents, employers, and visitors.

### **Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities**

Ensuring diligence around voluntary measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 will prevent illness and potentially death in Niagara. As well, it will maximize the opportunity to reopen businesses safely. This directly supports two of Council's Strategic Priorities:

- Supporting Businesses and Economic Growth
- Healthy and Vibrant Community

### **Other Pertinent Reports**

None

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