
Memorandum

PHD-C 3-2020

Subject: COVID-19 Response and Business Continuity in Public Health & Emergency Services
Date: June 4, 2020
To: Public Health & Social Services Committee
From: M. Mustafa Hirji, Medical Officer of Health & Commissioner (Acting)

Current Status as of June 4, 2020

- The latest updates including statistics can be found at <https://niagararegion.ca/covid19>
- There continues to be success in “flattening the curve” and reducing the spread of COVID-19 in Niagara. Through the month of May, 23 out of 31 days saw only single digit case growth. Excluding the large outbreak on one farm, thusfar June has also seen small, single digit case growth.
- Success continues in managing and preventing long term care and retirement home outbreaks and reducing infections originating in them. In the last month, there have been fewer than 5 infections in these facilities, and as of the date of this memo, only 1 long term care outbreak remains active, and there are zero retirement home outbreaks.
- One large outbreak is currently being managed at a local farm, affecting 60 persons. Several outbreaks on farms have emerged across Ontario in recent weeks, highlighting a new setting in which outbreaks seem to occur.
- Although we are seeing success in slowing the spread of COVID-19, the infection is not gone and will never be gone. Until there is broad immunity throughout the population, the infection will circulate more as we open society more. It remains critical in the coming weeks to re-emphasize the importance of physical distancing, hand hygiene, and wearing face coverings when one cannot keep distance from others. This protects a person, and the community more widely.
- As the province continues to lift restrictions on the economy and social life, Public Health & Emergency Services is watching closely for signs of increased infection transmission.
- Public Health is increasingly being called by local business and institutions to support their re-opening. Although Public Health wishes to assist, capacity to do

so is limited given the priority for our staff to focus on case and contact management and the several thousand local business and institutions wanting personal attention. We are therefore focusing on operations we normally inspect (e.g. food services, personal services, pools), but for other sectors, providing general advice and pointing to provincial resources with detailed sector-by-sector guidance. [A new page on our web site](#) functions as a one-stop shop for both local and provincial resources for business that are re-opening.

Previous (May 8) Summary on Business Continuity (Updates Underlined)

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

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.

Significant Initiatives or Actions Taken

There are three 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 has been scaled-up to 86 front line FTE as well as 20 FTE of support staff and 9 supervisory/leadership staff trained to support this, as needed. 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 to medical students. The operation now works 7 days a week, 08:00 to 20:00.

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. We are also helping health care providers acquire personal protective equipment and testing materials.

An additional role around supporting the health care system has been to enable Niagara Health to maximize the capacity of its COVID-19 assessment centres. Public Health has been temporarily assessing and prioritizing persons concerned about COVID-19 for testing at the assessment centres. Public Health is in the process of transitioning this effort to primary care providers so that Public Health staff can shift to focus even more on other elements of COVID-19 response. A

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

Approximately 50 FTE currently support the health care and social services sector within the Emergency Operations Centre, all redeployed from normal public health work.

3. **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 20 media interviews per week. Daily, Public Health has over 20,000 interactions with the public across all channels.

Approximately 10 staff have been redeployed from usual public health operations to support the Emergency Operations Centre with public messaging.

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.

Finally, existing mass immunization plans are being updated and preparedness is underway for if and when a COVID-19 vaccination is available.

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Case & Contact Management capacity readied for deployment as cases increase with increased economic and social interactions

3 months to 6 months

- Projections on operations in the future will depend on Provincial government policy decisions around COVID-19 response. The expectation is that current emergency operations would continue with emphasis shifting based on provincial response.

Clinical Services Division (Excluding Mental Health)

Current State of Operations

Most efforts in this area normally focus on infectious disease prevention. Almost all staff (76.5 FTE of 84 total) have been reallocated to the Emergency Operations Centre for COVID-19 response. Current operations are limited to

- 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
- inspection primary care for appropriate cold chain with respect to vaccinations
- 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

Operational Outlook

1 month & 3 months

- Continued minimal operations in order to enable COVID-19 response

6 months

- If schools re-open in the fall, school-based vaccinations may resume.

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. 59.8 of 65 staff remain in their role with Mental Health.

Services/Operational Changes

- Shift of some in-person clinics to remote delivery
- Reduction in some volume of work to shift 10 FTE to Emergency Operations and to provide mental health case management in shelters.

Operational Outlook

- Anticipate no changes to current operations over the next 6 months.

Environmental Health

Current State of Operations

Several lines of inspection have been discontinued due to closures of certain sectors (e.g. food services, personal services, recreational pools). However, others are more important than ever (e.g. infection control inspections of long term care homes and retirement homes). Approximately 20 of 43 FTE have been reallocated to Emergency Operations, some formally redeployed but many not redeployed. The remaining staff focus on

- 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 remaining food premises (e.g. take-outs)

- Inspection of housing and infection prevention amongst temporary foreign workers
- Support and advice to private drinking water and small drinking water system operators
- Surveillance and prevention of West Nile Virus, Lyme Disease, and other vector born 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

- Reduction of food services inspections
- Cessation of personal services inspections
- Cessation of inspection of recreational water (pools, splash pads, spas)
- Increase of infection control investigations of long term care facilities and retirement homes
- Refocusing infection control investigations of day cares to focus on very frequent inspection of those that remain operational

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Continuing with intense inspections of long term care facilities and retirement homes, as well as other congregate living locations (e.g. group homes)
- Additional inspections of local farms and workplaces where transmission is likely.

3 month & 6 month

- Projections on operations in the future will depend on Provincial government policy decisions around COVID-19 response. Loosening of social restrictions might necessitate resumption of inspections of food services, personal services, beaches, and other areas.

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 likely to be 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. 39.8 of 45 staff remain in their role supporting work on these health issues.

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

- Initiating new initiatives

3 month & 6 month

- 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 has been redeployment of 84 of 121 FTE in Family Health to support Emergency Operations.

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.

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
- Cessation of school health activities
- Shifting all prenatal/postnatal support to virtual options from in-person service
- Shifting home visits to remote connections

For the period of 16 March 2020 to 18 May 2020:

- Over 800 phone/video “visits” provided to families through HBHC, NFP, ICDS
- Over 150 BF outreach “visits” virtually
- Over 500 interactions with Niagara Parents (phone/chat)
- Nearly 150 new registrants for online prenatal classes

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Continue some school health work through virtual connection with students and parents

3 month & 6 month

- 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, as well as engagement within schools.

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 35 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 are slightly below baseline, and operational response is normal. There are some paramedics who have been exposed to COVID-19 and must be off work to protect their patients and co-workers. EMS is facing increased pressures around personal protective equipment procurement given global shortages.

Services/Operational Changes

- Reduction of paramedic student training activities

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Completion and implementation of a Pandemic Plan for response prioritization should call volumes grow due to COVID-19. 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 ambulance response, as well as increase 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.

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Ongoing support of current Emergency Operations Centres while also assisting local area municipalities around anticipated flood response.

3 month

- Ongoing support of current Emergency Operations Centres while also increasingly supporting recovery planning efforts

6 month

- Ongoing support of current Emergency Operations Centres and recovery planning efforts. There may be some elements of recovery planning that can begin to be implemented by this date.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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