

John Henry, Regional Chair

Hi, I'm John Henry, Chair of Durham Region. Thank you for joining us for this virtual Town Hall.

Tonight, we are joined by several members of our senior leadership team. First, I am pleased to welcome Chief Administrative Officer, Elaine Baxter-Trahair. Elaine will be saying a few words shortly.

We are also joined by Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region's Medical Officer of Health and Pepi McTavish, our Associate Medical Officer of Health. During a situation such as this, we rely on past experiences to help us make the best possible decisions. To that point, we are so fortunate to have someone as experienced as Dr. Kyle on our team. We look forward to hearing from him.

In addition, tonight we are also joined by:

- ✓ Paul Martin, Chief of the Durham Regional Police Service
- ✓ Jim Moir, Deputy Chief of the Region of Durham Paramedic Service
- ✓ Don Beaton, Commissioner of our Corporate Services Department
- ✓ Stella Danos-Papaconstantinou, Commissioner of Social Services
- ✓ Susan Siopis, Commissioner of Works
- ✓ Nancy Taylor, Commissioner of Finance
- ✓ Bill Holmes, General Manager of Durham Region Transit
- ✓ Brian Bridgeman, Commissioner of Planning and Economic Development
- ✓ Simon Gill, Director of Economic Development
- ✓ James Kilgour, Director of Emergency Management

Whether you are joining us by telephone, listening online, or taking part through the Rogers TV broadcast, we are glad to have you with us tonight.

Remember: we want to hear from you. Because tonight is about you. So, please, join the conversation. Take a moment to submit a question—whether its via phone or online. Because we are here to help and provide you with the information you need.

Over the past several weeks, Durham Region has shown what it means to be in this together. Your efforts have been inspiring.

You have stayed home and practised physical distancing. Efforts that have helped to protect the health and safety of our communities.

We know this is a difficult time. And we, as a Region, are looking at various ways to help. We're waiving transit fares at this time. We have created free emergency child care spots for our front-line and essential workers.

And for those of you may need a little extra time, we have suspended all water and sewer bill late payment charges, collection notifications and water shut-offs for non-payment.

We're working to take care of our vulnerable communities by co-ordinating emergency support for unsheltered residents; and offering access to emergency assistance under Ontario Works.

We also understand this is a very unpredictable and difficult time for our business community. We all miss shopping in our local stores. Taking in the downtowns that have been the heart of our communities for years.

I can assure you that the Durham Economic Development Task Force is working to deliver urgently needed support and resources to our business community. This team of local economic development experts are advocating on behalf of our local business owners; working to make sure that their concerns are addressed and actioned.

Durham Region is one of the most vibrant, innovative and diverse communities within the Province of Ontario. Together, we are proving that we intend to keep it that way.

Before I pass it on to Elaine to provide some remarks, I want to express my most sincere thanks to all our front-line workers. You are all true heroes. You have shown us all how to be Durham Strong and I couldn't be more proud of each and every one of you.

On behalf of everyone here in Durham, thank you for everything that you have done, and continue to do, to keep us safe as we navigate this unprecedented situation.

Thank you

[Elaine Baxter-Trahair, Chief Administrative Officer](#)

Hi everyone. I'm Elaine Baxter-Trahair, Chief Administrative Officer for Durham Region.

Thank you for taking the time to join us tonight. Along with myself and Chair Henry, our Durham Region senior leadership team is happy to answer your questions and provide you with information as we face this challenging time together.

Navigating a pandemic is something that we've never done before. It's a once-in-a-lifetime situation that has, unfortunately, impacted and changed the lives of everyone.

I would like to start by thanking everyone for doing their part to keep our community safe. I know it's been difficult. We've been asked to stay six feet apart, use technology to keep in touch with loved ones, and basically, do the opposite of what we—as humans—do. Socialize.

And while this has been a difficult time, it has been incredible to see the overwhelming display of our strong community spirit. Believe me: our front-line and health-care workers really appreciate the support you have shown. They know you are standing behind them.

Throughout this situation, one thing has remained constant. The health and safety of our residents has been, and will continue to be, our number one priority.

Over the past few weeks, our employees have worked around the clock to maintain essential services—those that directly impact the lives of our community members.

Our employees are responsible for public health, long-term care, water and sewer, and more. We have front-line workers, such as paramedics and police officers. We have crews maintaining our roads, bridges and traffic signals to ensure they remain safe.

We are incredibly proud of our how employees have continued to provide those essential services that directly impact the daily lives of our community members.

It is our employees who have worked in partnership with a diverse assortment of local non-profit agencies to provide valuable support to vulnerable residents. Because we want to make sure they too have the support they need to make it through this difficult time.

We are getting through this, together. And this Region will be stronger because of it.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to join us tonight.

I now turn this over to Dr. Robert Kyle, the Medical Officer of Health for Durham Region to provide an update on COVID-19 in Durham Region.

[Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region's Medical Officer of Health](#)

Welcome everybody, I am pleased to be here tonight to do my part and to answer your questions.

For those of you who haven't discovered our web resources – I would urge you to go to durham.ca/NovelCoronavirus. On that page there are resources and tools for you, the public, as well as for medical professionals, the school community and our other partners.

In particular, I would urge you to go to durham.ca/CovidCases to get the latest on the number of cases of COVID-19 in Durham Region by municipality. If you haven't gone to that website recently, we have added more functionality so you can get more information about cases, particularly in long-term care homes and in retirement homes.

Currently, we have about 750 cases in Durham Region and about 12 outbreaks on the go. Having said that, I think it is important, and to underscore what you have heard from Chair Henry and the CAO that COVID-19 is a journey, it's not a sprint. We all have a part to play in terms of flattening the curve and decreasing the demand on our hospitals and acute care system. I think we are making a difference, but we have a long ways to go, particularly with respect to long-term care homes and retirement homes.

So, I want to thank you all for doing your part with respect to physical distancing, social distancing and we all appreciate the sacrifices that you and your families have made to overcome this pandemic. We will get there. It will take some time. It is a journey; it's not a sprint.

Moderator, Jody Shanoff

For those of you just joining us, my name is Jody Shanoff and I am your moderator for this evening's virtual Town Hall. I'm pleased to be here with Region of Durham Chair, John Henry, staff from the Region and local health officials to discuss the measures in place to control the spread of COVID-19.

Question

It's a tough time in our region. People are scared and are really struggling. How is Durham supporting residents during this unprecedented time? How do you think we will bounce back after it is all over?

Answer – Nancy Taylor, Commissioner of Finance

There are a couple of steps we have taken from a Finance perspective. One of which is we have suspended all water and sewer bill late payment charges and, in conjunction with that, we have suspended collection and notifications and water shut-offs for non-payment so nobody will have their water shut off for not being able to pay their water bill.

We've also partnered with all the local municipalities across the region and we are essentially having a grace period for interest and penalties on property taxes, again, to buy us some time to get us through this journey as Dr. Kyle was referencing. And we have also instituted free transit.

Answer – Simon Gill, Director of Economic Development

We have formed an economic task force with our area municipalities, the BIA, chambers and boards and small business centre. We are all working together to provide businesses with the support and information they need right now. We are also working together on a recovery strategy. The recovery strategy is focused on making sure our economy bounces back when we eventually start to emerge from this, by advocating for the needs of businesses, guiding them through accessing support and providing small businesses that are still operational and are offering safe pick-up or delivery. I will just add that the recovery strategy that is in development is also going to address and include social issues not just economic recovery.

Question – Rose

Why do PSW's wear their uniforms in public spaces like the supermarket and the bus instead of when they finish work, just changing into their regular clothing?

Answer – Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region's Medical Officer of Health

I can't speak to specific circumstances – depending on the patients they have cared for and the circumstances in the home (whether there is COVID-19 or not). They should go straight home after their shift and change their clothes and practise good hygiene. If they are seen in public with their work clothes on, I can comment on the circumstances: perhaps a worker is on the way to work as opposed to finishing work. But generally speaking, work clothes should stay in the workplace and when a shift is completed it's

just good hygienic practise to go straight home, change your clothes, have a shower, that sort of thing. And make sure hygiene is practiced at home at all times

Question - Jim

I have witnessed people in my neighbourhood not practicing physical distancing. My question is, what, if anything, is the Region and/or the police prepared to do if such things are observed?

Answer – Paul Martin, Chief of the Durham Regional Police Service

With respect to physical distancing, we don't have a by-law like Peel Region or Toronto does so being within six feet is not against the law here in Durham Region.

What we do have is the Emergency Measures and the Civil Protection Act, which basically says at this point in time, the Province enacted it, people who are gathering with five people or more or if non-essential businesses are operating, then we will enforce the Emergency Measures Act. We have established on www.drps.ca online reporting, where people can go and report these types of incidents where there's gatherings of more than five people, if they are disobeying the closed parks, those types of things. And, if businesses that are operating that shouldn't be.

The other thing people can do is go to our non-emergency line at 905-579-1520 ext. 5802 and they can leave a message. We have had about 1,300 calls so far since the Emergency Act was proclaimed and we have cleared about 75 per cent of those calls up to this point and we continue to clear them as we speak. I would suggest people to call us if you see these types of infractions but as far as people being within six feet, that is not specifically prohibited under the Emergency Measures Act and we don't have a by-law either.

Question - Sandra

What is the Region doing to help long-term care and retirement facilities?

Answer – Stella Danos-Papaconstantinou, Commissioner of Social Services

We have four regionally owned long-term care homes. We have Lakeview, Fairview Lodge, Hillsdale Terraces and Hillsdale Estates. I'll be able to speak to our four homes this evening. Our Long-Term Care Division falls under the direction of the Ministry of Long-Term Care and we work especially close with Durham Public Health. We have active screening at our homes for our staff – what this means is when our staff arrive at our homes, their temperature is taken and they are asked a number of questions to determine if they are suitable to come in to work. If they are, they are provided with a mask and they carry on with their day. Upon leaving they are screened again; their temperature is taken again, and they are asked questions again and then they leave to go off on their day.

Also, as of March 19, we have stopped permitting staff from working at any other assigned home. Staff are provided with their personal protective equipment (PPE) and it would depend on where they work in the long-term care home, it might be somewhat different. We follow infection prevention and control procedures and when we are in an outbreak, we isolate our residents meaning they stay in their rooms including at mealtimes. Our staff practise social distancing throughout the day as much as possible, except when they are caring for the residents in which case they wear the PPE and provide distancing when it is safe to do so.

Question - Deborah

We hear the messaging that this is a journey and not a sprint. Many businesses are in crisis, have had to lay off staff, they don't qualify for financial help etc. People are wondering how to plan for future recovery or if they should claim bankruptcy. Is there any type of timeline for small businesses so they can start to plan to try to survive this pandemic?

Answer – Simon Gill, Director of Economic Development

I'll talk about the impact on small business first. We recognize of course, that the impacts on small business being felt by COVID-19 are severe and we are working with the Economic Development Task Force to support small and medium businesses. It was actually the first thing we did to help local business was to form the Task Force. We surveyed the business community and got over a thousand responses to understand what the impacts were, what the needs were, and at the same time we set up a centralized website where businesses can go for information about all the various financial supports available from the federal government, the province, the Region and the cities and towns. That website is investdurham.ca/CovidResponse. We also immediately started advocating on behalf of small businesses in the region. Our Regional Chair has hosted calls with MP's and MPP's, written letters and we have been sharing the impacts on businesses with the Premiere and with the Prime Minister, stressing the urgency and the need for help.

The Economic Development Task Force has actually been doing a lot more to support businesses, running "support local" promotion campaigns, organizing and promoting webinars and offering direct one-on-one support. We recognize the path out of this is very unclear at the moment, but we are working on a recovery strategy and we are working with all of our stakeholders across the region and with all of our area municipalities to figure out a way to get through this.

Question - Dan

Why were PSW's, who were at several locations and with patients in the community, not checked upon entry into the homes every time they came to work?

Answer – Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region's Medical Officer of Health

The answer depends on the timing of the witnessed behaviour. As the Commissioner of Social Services said earlier, active screening has been put in place, restrictions on

essential visitors etc. and more recently either a Directive or an Emergency Order has been put in place to restrict PSW's and other health care workers working at more than one site with respect to a long-term care home or retirement home.

That it is fairly recent, why did it take so long? I'm not at the Central Command table – there are a lot of decisions that they have to make, and I think it depends on our experience. It depends on what is happening on the ground in long-term care homes and retirement homes as to the rules that were put in place. And as more and more cases were occurring despite the best efforts to restrict visitation, active screening and so forth, more and more additional measures were put in place including having workers only work at one site. I should add to that I believe this has been in place for at least a couple of weeks if not, longer in the Region's long-term care homes.

Question - Jennifer

Has a concern with the animal to human contagions, particularly with wild animals like raccoons being seen around more especially during the day. Should I be concerned?

Answer – Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region's Medical Officer of Health

There is no evidence that raccoons or other animals in particular are contributing to community transmission in Ontario or in Canada. Transmission is occurring by droplets being spread from person to person. When the pandemic first started in China it is believed that coronavirus, which was circulating among the bird population in particular and at live markets where there was very intimate contact between humans and birds; the virus was able to be transmitted from birds to humans. But the pandemic is being spread by person-to-person contact now, so if your concern is that the wild animal is contributing to this, there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that is happening.

Question

How is the Region protecting paramedics; what precautions are in place and is there enough PPE?

Answer – Jim Moir, Deputy Chief of the Region of Durham Paramedic Service

First off, I would like to say how proud we are of the front-line paramedics and a big thank you for the work they are doing day in and day out especially at this time.

Paramedics are often the first point of contact for medical care in our community and their health and safety is paramount. We have put protocols in place to ensure paramedics are triaged and risk assessed at various points along the continuum of care.

Medics, by virtue of their training and education are versed in dealing with infectious disease of most kinds and while COVID-19 is new, paramedics keeping patients and themselves safe is not. We have been engaged with provincial partners to receive ongoing updates and assure medical directives, protocols and best practices are implemented with the goal of minimizing exposure to respiratory droplets and risk of

infection, new protocols regarding screening, treatment, PPE and transportation have been implemented and paramedics have been educated and trained on the changes in response to COVID-19.

Question - Sam

What are the stats on the homeless and is there anything being done to meet their needs in terms of where they stay, food and also the food situation for them and others that may be in need of food? And lastly, if the community wants to help, is there any way to contribute by either giving or helping in-person?

Answer – Chair Henry

Donations can be made online to community organizations such as Feed the Need.

Answer – Stella Danos-Papaconstantinou, Commissioner of Social Services

The Region of Durham is actively co-ordinating the COVID-19 response for our unsheltered by enhancing the shelter system to provide more support to those who are at risk. We've extended funding for overnight warming centres to increase and maintain the capacity of the shelter system. We're working with their shelter operators and our Health Department to ensure that staff are doing everything they can to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and support the clients who have these symptoms.

We have secured hotel partnerships to expand capacity at the shelter system to ensure distancing, isolation of at-risk clients and isolation of clients pending test results. We are securing a large facility to support the shelter system with COVID-19 response. We're also working with our community partners to co-ordinate resources to ensure unsheltered residents can access washroom facilities, food security, shelter and outreach support.

Part of our COVID-19 homelessness funding will be put into a COVID-19 community assistance fund which has actually been released as of today; information is on our website. This is available as a one-time allocation for non-profit organizations in Durham Region that are providing urgent help to vulnerable residents, homeless residents and residents at risk of homelessness impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This information and an application is available on the Region's website. In addition, there is a community resources page that has a list of amazing resources in our community to support everyone including those resident that are unsheltered at this time.

Question - Rosemary

What kind of protection is being offered to the bus drivers. Is there any way there could be protective shields in place to protect them from contracting the disease and potentially bringing it home to their families?

Answer – Bill Holmes, General Manager of Durham Region Transit

There is a plan in the works to install safety shields on all of our buses over the next year to two years, but in the meantime, one of the first actions we took on the 19th of March was to ensure our bus operator were safe and we implemented the rear door boarding process so all customers now board through the rear door. We sectioned off the front of the bus, so the back two thirds of the bus are for customers only and at the same time we waived having to pay a fare so customers do not have to come up to the front of the bus and that maintained the physical distancing between our operators and the customers.

On the specialized services side, we have supplied our operators with a full suite of PPE which includes gloves, a mask and a face shield.

Question - Joanne

How quickly will there be more support and experts at the nursing home in Pickering that is reporting 33 deaths?

Answer – Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region's Medical Officer of Health

Yesterday I issued an order to Lakeridge Health and Orchard Villa. The order was to have Lakeridge Health do an assessment and develop an action plan to provide assistance to Orchard Villa with respect to infection prevention and control and with respect to the clinical aspects of the home. The order also ordered Orchard Villa to comply with the advice, assessment and recommendations of Lakeridge Health.

I am aware a team from Lakeridge Health went to Orchard Villa today. I believe that an assessment was done and an action plan is being developed as we speak. I don't have particulars regarding extra staffing that may be required. I don't have the specifics as to how that would look, but Orchard Villa is of immediate importance locally. They are on top of this file and earlier today the province issued a news release that indicated that quite a number of additional supports are being put in place, including a call to the federal government for assistance. The decisions of where staff goes is from a higher level or in the case of Orchard Villa, is between Lakeridge Health and Orchard Villa.

I am confident that both parties are working on this as quickly and as effectively as possible and that the other recommendations will be implemented as quickly as possible.

Question - Paul

When is Durham going to be re-opened, and will it be in phases? Is there a strategy? My worry is about the economic impact long-term of being closed down.

Answer – John Henry, Regional chair

Yesterday we met with the mayors and the chairs of the Greater Toronto/Hamilton area on a conference call and this was a very big part of the discussion. We are working with the province and trying to find a time when we can do this. And it has to be

collaborative, not one municipality can open up and leave others closed. It just means moving people in different ways. There is great concern about doing this in an effective and orderly manner so we can continue to flatten the curve.

Answer – Elaine Baxter-Trahair, Chief Administrative Officer

It will depend on when the province begins to lift the Emergency Order which we understand will be done very incrementally. The Region is still providing essential services. Over 1,000 staff are providing services from home, others are on the ground and on the front-lines, including our transit workers, our Public Health workers, Social Service staff and Waste staff; across the board. All of these workers are required and are on the front lines.

We are taking care to ensure we use social distancing. We also have a robust recovery framework that we are putting into place that will address the community needs at a social level to ensure we are addressing community health and safety. The built infrastructure to ensure we are advancing infrastructure projects which will help put people back to work. The economic framework which will assist businesses get back up and running; and the fourth leg of this, is looking at how the Region itself will get business back to normal. We anticipate this being done over an extended period of time.

Question – Alice

I have seen people getting together in groups larger than five. Is this illegal? And how do we report this?

Answer – Paul Martin, Chief of the Durham Regional Police Service

Yes, it could be illegal – any groups of more than five people is illegal with the exception of families of more than five people living under the same roof. If you are seeing groups of more than five people congregating or if they are playing on playgrounds, those types of things, they should contact us by phone on the non-emergency line at 905-579-1520 ext. 5802 or online on the website at www.drps.ca.

Have received around 1,300 calls so far and are responding to 50 to 60 per day. We will respond to try to educate people and if necessary. We will enforce the law.

Question - Christina

Are you asking people travelling from other provinces to self-quarantine when they come to Ontario?

Answer - Elaine Baxter-Trahair, Chief Administrative Officer

When our employees return from travel, they are required to self-isolate for two weeks before returning to work if they are symptom-free.

Question - Allison

Do we know how many confirmed cases of COVID-19 are in the region?

Answer – Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region’s Medical Officer of Health

The data tracker is available on durham.ca. It provides all the data with respect to cases in the region as a whole and by municipality. It describes the cases that are in home-isolation, those that are in ICU and unfortunately those who are deceased. You can also see information by age and by gender for cases as a whole or in particular by affected long-term care home and retirement home.

I believe that we are about 750 or so cases as of the time of day that the Tracker was updated today, and we have 12 long-term care homes or retirement homes that are in outbreak. It is a terrific resource and would urge the questioner to browse.

Question - Larry

How many times can a person get COVID-19?

Answer – Dr. Pepi McTavish, Associate Medical Officer of Health

We don’t know yet. We don’t know if people who have had coronavirus can become immune like with other viruses. We have seen some research out of other countries that suggest that they have seen people who have been sick, have become sick again. It is a great question and I’ll say right now we don’t know and we’re waiting as the disease progresses and the research progresses hopefully, we will have a better idea.

Question – Julia

How is Durham Region protecting LTC homes against further outbreaks of COVID-19. What is the short term and long-term plan to provide additional support beyond the basic physical needs?

Answer - Stella Danos-Papaconstantinou, Commissioner of Social Services

In the Region we operate four long-term care homes we follow the directives of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Long-Term Care as well as Durham Public Health.

Before COVID-19 became an outbreak, we started to screen staff upon entering our long-term care homes and by March 14th we were actively screening staff by taking their temperatures upon entering the home. Now we take their temperatures when they are leaving as well.

We also stopped permitting any visitors into the homes as of March 14. Only essential visitors, which are our staff who are allowed to attend and we also stopped allowing staff to work at any other health care locations of March 19th.

We have very qualified staff at each home. Each home has a medical doctor. We have qualified registered nurses and registered practical nurses and PSW’s. In addition to medical care, we also have recreation for the residents including Facetime family members, music, reading and games. And we have hired care aids because we no longer have volunteers at this time. Long term, we will take advice from the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care to ensure we are meeting the needs of our residents the best way that we can.

Question – Viviane

When I ride the bus, I am the only one wearing a mask. The front of the bus is off limits and I feel like we are packed in like sardines. It is hard to keep distance from other passengers. Should there be a limit of passengers allowed on the bus?

Answer – Bill Holmes, General Manager of Durham Region Transit

There are three zones on the bus—the rear of the bus is for the majority of passengers boarding at the rear of the bus; the middle of the bus is for those with mobility issues or for people with strollers; and the front of the bus is reserved for bus operators to ensure they have adequate physical distancing from people. We have implemented a half-seated load which is approximately 10 to 15 people on a bus so people can spread out. Operators track and limit those load restrictions.

Question - Kerry

I live in a small community in a co-op. I have a compromised immune system and am worried. How should I go about telling people that COVID-19 is serious and relay to them the difference between this virus and the regular flu?

Answer – Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region's Medical Officer of Health

I issued an order several weeks ago that requires persons that have tested positive for COVID-19 to be in self-isolation. At the time they are notified of a positive test they are also notified that they are required to self-isolate. There is a penalty if you do not follow the order and in accordance with provincial guidelines, we do check-in by phone on a periodic basis to ensure that self-isolation is occurring.

Speaking more generally, people not respecting physical distancing, social distancing, respiratory etiquette, hand hygiene those sorts of other messages that is more difficult – all we can do is provide key messages and the rationale around the reasons for the messages. Follow our website durham.ca/NovelCoronavirus for information and if you want assistance, if we can provide it, then I would urge you as well to go to Durham Health Connection line. However, I should warn you that a lot of that traffic is related to cases and contact management so there may be a delay in terms of answering your call, so it is really best to go online. It is a serious issue and some settings are more difficult to adhere to good sound public health advice than others.

Question – Derick

Can you comment on both the short-term and long-term staffing levels of the water supply, electrical supply and water treatment plants?

Answer – Susan Siopis, Commissioner of Works

Our water treatment plants and sewage treatment plants are up and running. They are fully staffed at this time. We have taken additional measures so the workers in the plants remain healthy. We have broadened shifts so that we have less overlap at shift turnovers so that we can ensure that our workers stay healthy.

We have supplied all of the PPE that might be needed there, as we always do. You are probably aware that all of those services that you mentioned have been deemed essential. We have them up and running now and see no reason why we wouldn't in the longer term.

Question - Vito

I have a small landscaping business. I have had to turn down all my clients up until now. I'm wondering what is considered essential in Durham Region with respect to lawn care as I've seen some people doing this type of work already. Would like clarification about what type of work they can and cannot do with respect to the landscape and lawn care industry?

Answer – Simon Gill, Director of Economic Development

We are hearing a lot of confusion around these industries regarding what is essential versus non-essential. Our best advice is to go to the province, to the provincial website as they are the governing authority over what is deemed essential and what has been ordered to be closed. If you go to the Ontario government website there is a list of essential workplaces and there is a 1-800 number that you can call for clarification. That number is 1-888-444-3659 for the Stop the Spread business information line at the Province of Ontario.

Question - Carol

Are there any outbreaks in neighbourhoods or are they more linked to long-term care homes?

Answer – Dr. Robert Kyle, the Region's Medical Officer of Health

When we think of outbreaks, we generally think of institutions. These are hospitals, long-term care homes and retirement homes. Typically, an outbreak is more than what is normally expected. It is an assessment that is done by Public Health and then that triggers a number of outbreak control measures.

In the case of COVID-19 the rules still apply in institutions but only one case constitutes an outbreak response. There are numerous measures that are put in place in an outbreak situation such as increased testing and public health measures that would not only try to detect disease but try to control and ultimately prevent disease. What is happening in the community is considered community transmission and is not considered an outbreak. It really is a term specific to institutions. We are using the term "pandemic" which describes a worldwide experience of a novel coronavirus and that is applied to communities that have community transmission or cases in institutions.

Question

I have heard most Durham Region employees are still employed. Is that true? If so, why are they still working?

Answer - Elaine Baxter-Trahair, Chief Administrative Officer

That is true. Many of our workers are front-line essential services such as Public Health, workers at long-term care facilities, workers managing water treatment plants, workers running the transit system. So, they are on the front-line and other staff are working behind-the-scenes providing support to those individuals. We have over 1,600 staff working from home on essential activities and a number of staff have been re-deployed to those areas that are particularly busy as a result of the pandemic. This would include re-deployment to our long-term care facilities. Where staff are unable to work from home, they have been the priority to be redeployed. This is a very small number. Some staff have elected to take a leave of absence without pay or have taken vacation time. At this point, the Region has not had to layoff any staff. The majority of our staff are engaged in essential services.

Question - Sherry

How close is the city to providing toilets for the homeless youth in Oshawa? We have about 450 young people currently with only one place to go for bathroom facilities which is the Refuge on Court Street. The need is critical now.

Answer - Stella Danos-Papaconstantinou, Commissioner of Social Services

In Oshawa, in addition to the Refuge, the Backdoor Mission is also available which will have washrooms and shower facilities as well as on-site medical support. In addition, in Pickering the Dunbarton indoor pool facility will be available as of Friday. The Ajax Community Centre and in Whitby the Iroquois Sports facility that is already operational.

Question - Sullen

Generally speaking we have been told that COVID-19 is transmitted person-to-person but in some medical research circles there is still some ambivalence as to the possibility of it being transmitted as airborne. That being said, can you comment on the degree to which this virus can be transmitted airborne and if it is not, then the only purpose of a mask seems to be to prevent our contact when someone coughs. I would like a little more information with regard to the use of masks, physical distancing and whether or not this virus is transmitted airborne.

Answer – Dr. Pepi McTavish, Associate Medical Officer of Health

I have also read some of the same research. Those studies looked at airborne transmission where the researchers are making aerosolization's that we wouldn't actually be making in real-life. This is nothing like what we would encounter in day-to-day practice. Certainly, there are procedures whereby droplets can become airborne and, in those instances, medical practitioners would wear a higher level of PPE, but in day-to-day, non-medical and not invasive procedures. Out there it is spread droplet to droplet; so when somebody sneezes on you, when you touch a doorknob, you touch your mouth, you touch your eyes and then it enters you. COVID-19 is a big molecule, it doesn't like to be airborne it can float for a couple of metres and then it drops to the ground because it's heavy.

In answer to your second question about masks; when people wear non-medical masks, it is to protect everybody else from their disease. When medical workers wear medical grade masks it is to protect them from the people that they are providing care to.

Question - Kelly

What is our current situation with PPE? Do our front-line workers have what they need?

Answer – Paul Martin, Chief of the Durham Regional Police Service

We have a pretty good level of all types of PPE. Like everyone else we would like to have more stock. Currently we have everything we need to deploy to our staff. It depends on how much longer this goes on, but certainly we are trying to build up our stock so we have several weeks worth.

Answer – Jim Moir, Deputy Chief of the Region of Durham Paramedic Service

I will echo Chief Martin's sentiments. It is difficult securing PPE. We monitor levels daily and are in constant contact with suppliers and are engaged with the provincial and local partners to ensure adequate supply. For the time being and the near future, we are in very good shape.

Answer – Stella Danos-Papaconstantinou, Commissioner of Social Services

In the four long-term care facilities we operate, we have adequate supply of PPE and always have. We have never had a problem with that.

Question - Tom

What are we doing for our police officers and our front-line workers during this pandemic?

Answer – Paul Martin, Chief of the Durham Regional Police Service

Obviously arresting people you have to go within the six feet. It's kind of related to the last question with respect to PPE. We make sure we have issued gloves, masks, hand wash and those types of things to our officers. Unfortunately, people still have been committing crimes and our officers have been doing a great job both on the education front and a great job of protecting the citizens of Durham Region.

I have to commend them as well, especially under these trying circumstances. What I can assure you is that before the officers get to a call they try to assess the level of risk over and above the normal risks but with this pandemic, our officers have been trained and are equipped with PPE should it be necessary to move in that close distance and take control.

Question - Glen

More of a comment. Thanks for the transparency and the updates via email. My question is about the self-testing: if I have two of the symptoms it says to self-isolate. If it gets worse, where do I go get tested? Does someone come to me? Do I go to you?

Answer – Dr. Pepi McTavish, Associate Medical Officer of Health

Thanks for the feedback on the website. If you are feeling unwell and would like to be tested, you do that online through the Lakeridge Health website. It is an assessment and that is how people in Durham Region would be assessed. You would complete all the information especially your phone number and then a physician will call you back and they will determine where you can be seen. We suggest that if you are not well, we recommend that you self-isolate for 14 days. People may have COVID-19 but are not tested. I will look at our website and see if we can make it clearer for people. Thank you for your feedback.

Question – Andrew (dropped call)

Answer

Question – Joe

What is Durham's financial position going to be with the pandemic progressing and we have higher expenses than normal? Are we going to have a big deficit?

Answer – Elaine Baxter-Trahair, Chief Administrative Officer

We are rigorously tracking expenditures that are occurring because of the pandemic and we do have a projection that takes us to the end of May that looks at possibly a loss or a net expenditure of 14 million dollars that was not anticipated.

We do not anticipate ending the year with a deficit. We will be looking at efficiencies within our operations throughout the course of the year to try to offset the shortfall. And, we will be also looking at possibly using some of our reserve funds. We are now looking at projections for six and nine months and will have more information on that likely in the coming months.

Question

I have been following the tracker on the Durham Regional website. Are these positive numbers? Are we flattening the curve?

Answer – Dr. Pepi McTavish, Associate Medical Officer of Health

Yes, we are certainly flattening the curve in our community. The numbers suggest that we are actually at the peak and it is going to be a slow decent to the other side; so the end is near.

Everyone has done their part to make sure that we get the level down so that we don't overwhelm our acute health care services. Where we are not seeing flattening of the curve is in our communal and institutional settings. The numbers in our long-term care homes and retirement homes are still increasing so there is a lot of work to be done and

there is a lot of work that is happening with all the local community hospital and learning players to work on this. So, we need to use what we have learned from flattening the curve in the community and apply this to the institutional settings. Hopefully we will start seeing the flattening of the curve in those settings as well.

Closing – John Henry, Regional Chair

I'd like to thank you Jody, for doing such a great job tonight. We've heard from the residents. We hear each and every day the Region is open for business. I encourage our residents to check our website for the most up-to-date information related to the COVID-19 situation.

I would like to thank all those who participated tonight and all the listeners. I want to thank our front-line service people who work in our hospitals and our long-term care facilities. To police, fire and paramedics for what they do. I want to thank all the people that we see but we don't normally say thank you to. I want to thank the clerks in the grocery stores, the folks that go in and keep the lights on at OPG and the people that keep our water running and our sewers working and the great work they do.

We are all in this together. I want to thank you for staying at home and not going out into groups. You are helping us to flatten the curve and together we are Durham strong.

Have a wonderful evening.