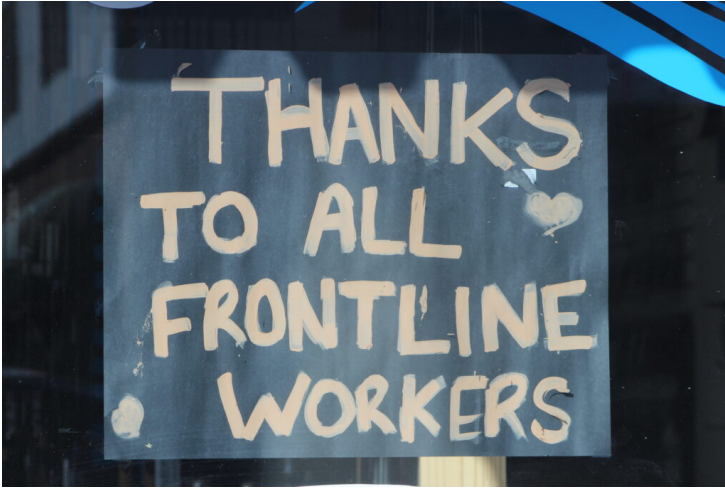


Lockdown begins Boxing Day as COVID-19 cases surge



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By Nate Smelle

Each day for eight days starting on Dec. 14, Ontario registered more than 2,000 new cases of COVID-19. With dozens of people dying from the coronavirus every day, and hospitals at or on the verge of reaching their capacity, over the weekend the provincial government decided to impose a province-wide lockdown.

Making it official, Premier Doug Ford announced the details of the lockdown during a press briefing held at Queen's Park in Toronto on Monday afternoon. Explaining the government's reason for locking down the province for the second time this year, he said "The number of daily cases continue to rise putting our hospitals and long-term care homes at risk. We need to stop the spread of this deadly virus. That's why, on the advice of Dr. Williams and other health experts, we are taking the difficult but necessary decision to shutdown the province and ask people to stay home. Nothing is more important right now than the health and safety of all Ontarians."

Ontario's chief medical officer of health, Dr. David Williams, advised all Ontarians to stay home as much as possible throughout the lockdown, and only make trips outside the home when necessary. This means only leaving home to pick up necessities such as food, medication, medical appointments; or, to help support vulnerable community members. The province is also advising employers in all industries to make "every effort to allow employees to work from home." "We continue to see the number of cases in the province grow and the trends in public health indicators worsen. Additional measures are needed provincewide in order to interrupt this concerning growth," said Dr. Williams. "We must work together to enable everyone to follow these new and time-limited restrictions and protect our health system and our communities."

For those living in the southern part of the province - North Hastings included - the lockdown will tentatively last for 28 days (Jan. 23) starting at 12:01 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 26. Beginning at the same time, Ontarians living north of Sudbury will be under a 14-day lockdown.

The lockdown comes in response to the provincial government's most recent modelling data, which shows that with the current rate of infection Ontario's case count would climb by 10,000 cases a day by the end January. According to the provincial government's latest data, hospitalizations for COVID-19 have increased by 74 per cent over the last four weeks and are more than 15 times higher than they were at the beginning of September. Furthermore, intensive care unit occupancy for COVID-19 has more than doubled over the last four weeks and is 20 times higher than at the beginning of September.

Currently, there are 915 COVID-19 patients in Ontario requiring acute care, 265 patients in ICU, with 152 on a ventilator. According to the province, cases across Ontario are continuing to grow, and the number of people requiring an intensive care bed is projected to rise well above 300 people within the next 10 days.

Similar to the provincial shutdown last March, the lockdown beginning on Saturday will demand that all non-essential businesses remain closed until the restrictions are lifted. In order to stop the trend of high COVID-19 transmission in communities, preserve health system capacity, safeguard vulnerable populations and those who care for them, and save lives, the province is implementing measures that will take effect on Boxing Day. Beginning on Dec. 26, the indoor organized public events and social gatherings, except with members of the same household (the people you live with) will be restricted.

No indoor organized public events and social gatherings, except with members of the same household (the people you live with). People who live alone and single parents, however, may consider having exclusive, close contact with another household to help reduce the negative impacts of social isolation. Outdoor organized public events and social gatherings with no more than 10 people in attendance are permitted as long as they are organized in compliance with public health advice on physical distancing: In-person shopping in most retail settings will be prohibited, however, curbside pickup and delivery can continue. Discount and big box retailers selling groceries will be limited to 25 per cent capacity for in-store shopping; whereas supermarkets, grocery stores and similar stores that primarily sell food, as well as pharmacies, will continue to operate at 50 per cent capacity for in-store shopping.

Restrictions in place will also impede indoor access to shopping malls. Patrons will be allowed to go to a designated indoor pickup area (by appointment only), essential retail stores that are permitted to be open (e.g. pharmacy, grocery store); or, subject to physical distancing and face covering requirements, to the food court for takeout purchases. While indoor and outdoor dining will be prohibited, restaurants, bars and other food or drink establishments will be permitted to operate by take out, drive-through, and delivery only.

The government of Ontario also released a list of businesses and places that are allowed to open. Businesses that supply or provide services to other essential businesses will be allowed to remain open; as will meeting or event spaces, court services, government services, mental health and addictions support services, social services, short-term rentals used by those in need of housing.

Restaurants, bars, and other food or drink establishments that only offer take-out, drive-thru, and delivery services can stay open during the lockdown, however indoor and outdoor dining are prohibited. Supermarkets, convenience stores, pharmacies, indoor farmer's markets and other stores that primarily sell food also made the list of essential businesses. Discount and big box retailers that sell food to the public are also permitted to open as long as members of the public are able to maintain two metres physical distance from every other person in the business or facility; and, the number of persons occupying any room that is open to the public does not exceed 50 per cent capacity of the particular room. Curbside pick-up and delivery will also be permitted for each of these businesses. For a full list of essential businesses and services visit:

<https://files.ontario.ca/moh-provincewide-shutdown-en-2020-12-21-v2b.pdf>.

Students, teachers, education workers, and parents will also be affected by the lockdown. With the exception of schools located in seven public health unit regions in the northern part of the province, in-class learning for elementary school students will not resume until Jan. 11. From Jan. 4 until Jan. 8 elementary students will move to remote learning. However, before and after school programs will be closed, except for emergency child care services provided for health care and frontline workers. In addition, school boards will be required to make provisions for continued in-person support for students with special education needs who cannot be accommodated through remote learning for whom remote learning is challenging.

"While our schools are not a source of rising community transmission, we can play an important part of the solution to save lives from COVID-19," said Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce. "During this period, students will pivot to teacher-led online learning, with child care provided for our frontline workers. We are taking proactive and preventative action to protect schools following the holiday break to ensure kids can continue in-class learning ? something we believe is so important ? for the remainder of the year."