

Ontario declares state of emergency, as health-care system ?on brink of collapse?

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By Nate Smelle

In light of the latest projections from the province regarding the spread of COVID-19, on Tuesday afternoon the government of Ontario declared a state of emergency. Premier Doug Ford also announced that they were issuing a province-wide stay-at-home order, as well as several new restrictions in hopes of getting the pandemic under control.

The stay-at-home order will come into effect starting on Thursday, Jan. 14 at 12:01 a.m., and remain in place for at least 28 days. Under this order Ontarians must remain at home except for when they need to pick up groceries or essential supplies, go to the pharmacy, or access health care services. Individuals are also permitted to leave their residence for exercise, or for essential work.

"The latest modelling data shows that Ontario is in a crisis and, with the current trends, our hospital ICUs will be overwhelmed in a few short weeks with unthinkable consequences," said Ford.

"That's why we are taking urgent and decisive action, which includes declaring a provincial emergency and imposing a stay-at-home-order. We need people to only go out only for essential trips to pick up groceries or go to medical appointments. By doing the right thing and staying home, you can stay safe and save lives."

The intention of this order and the new restrictions is to further limit people's mobility and reduced the number of daily contacts with those outside an immediate household. All businesses are also required to ensure that any employee who can work from home, does so. Furthermore, the new public health measures are meant to help stop the spread of COVID-19 by reducing concerning levels of mobility as the province continues its vaccine rollout and ramps up to mass vaccination.

The provincial modelling which brought about the more stringent restrictions highlights the accelerated spread of COVID-19; and how the situation has led to increased rates of hospitalization and ICU occupancy. Currently, ICU occupancy by COVID-19 patients in Onatrio has surpassed 400 beds. The province's projections indicated that if no new action is taken this number could climb as high as 1,000 beds by early February. The number of deaths due to COVID-19 is also rising at a dangerously high rate, and is expected to double from 50 to 100 deaths per day between now and the end of February. If left unchecked, the government said the pandemic has the potential to overwhelm Ontario's hospitals.

During the announcement on Jan. 12, Dr. Adalsteinn Brown, one of the health experts working with the province to fight the pandemic, pointed out that the recent data shows mobility and contacts between people have not decreased with the current restrictions. Adding to the heightened level of risk, he said, are the new variants of COVID-19 that have been detected in Ontario.

As part of the province's response to the pandemic the government said it will also enact the following additional public health measures:

? Outdoor organized public gatherings and social gatherings are further restricted to a limit of five people with limited exceptions. This is consistent with the rules during the lockdown during the first wave of COVID-19 in spring 2020 and will allow individuals and families to enjoy time outdoors safely.

? Individuals are required to wear a mask or face covering in the indoor areas of businesses or organizations that are open. Wearing a mask or face covering is now recommended outdoors when you can't physically distance more than two metres.

? All non-essential retail stores, including hardware stores, alcohol retailers, and those offering curbside pickup or delivery, must open no earlier than 7 a.m. and close no later than 8 p.m. The restricted hours of operation do not apply to stores that primarily sell

food, pharmacies, gas stations, convenience stores, and restaurants for takeout or delivery.

? Non-essential construction is further restricted, including below-grade construction, exempting survey.

Under the State of Emergency, the province has given authority to all enforcement and provincial offences officers, including the Ontario Provincial Police, local police forces, bylaw officers, and provincial workplace inspectors to issue tickets to individuals who do not comply with the stay-at-home-order.

"Extraordinary action is needed to protect the health and safety of Ontarians as we deal with this growing crisis," said Solicitor General Sylvia Jones.

"Our government is providing police and bylaw officers with the tools, and the authority, they need to enforce these critical restrictions and protect public health."

These authorities will also be responsible for ticketing those not wearing a mask or face covering indoors, as well as retail operators and companies who do not enforce the new measures. All enforcement personnel will also have the power to temporarily close a premise and disperse individuals who are in contravention of an order and will be able to disperse people who are gathering, regardless whether a premise has been closed or remains open such as a park or house.

In terms of how the new public measures will effect the re-opening of Ontario's schools in southern Ontario - Hastings and Prince Edward counties included - chief medical officer of health Dr. David Williams is expected to advise the Ministry of Education as to when it is safe to resume in-person learning by Jan. 20.

In order to keep students, staff and communities safe when schools do re-open, the following new health and safety measures will be put in place for in-person learning: Masking for Grade 1-3 and requirements for mask wearing outdoors; Enhanced screening protocols; and, Expanded targeted testing.

"At the heart of our continued efforts to protect against the spread of COVID-19 in our communities is a firm commitment to return kids to school safely," said Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

"Protecting our students, staff and their families is our top priority, and these additional measures build on our comprehensive plan to reopen schools and keep young children in child care safe."

A full list of emergency orders under the EMPCA as well as orders under the ROA can be found on the e-Laws website and at [Ontario.ca/alert](https://ontario.ca/alert).