

Health unit enhances restrictions as COVID-19 cases surge

By Nate Smelle

On Wednesday, March 31 the Hastings Prince Edward Public Health Unit reported what at the time was the region's highest daily case count since the start of the pandemic, with a record 32 new cases of COVID-19. According to the health unit's website, as of Monday, April 5 HPE set a new record, adding 37 more active cases to the tally. In total, there are now 137 active cases in Hastings and Prince Edward counties. At the same time, public health acknowledged that there were 15 active cases in Central Hastings, as well as one more in North Hastings.

In light of this significant spike in cases locally, the health unit has enhanced the public health measures it has in place throughout the region. Now, under these restrictions: indoor and outdoor gatherings at private residences cannot exceed more than five people; bookings for restaurants, personal service settings, and accommodations must not be accepted from anyone who resides outside of HPEC; and, all short-term accommodations (e.g. Airbnb's, Bed and Breakfast businesses, cottages) are immediately closed, including all bookings made prior to March 30. Individuals who are travelling to or within Hastings and Prince Edward counties for essential reasons - health care staff, medical appointments, and emergencies - will however, be permitted to book accommodations.

Noting how difficult a decision it was to implement these enhanced measures, HPE's medical officer of health and CEO Dr. Piotr Oglaza also acknowledged that it was necessary to protect the most vulnerable while the health unit works "diligently to increase immunity through vaccination." In order to lift these measures as soon as possible, he said the health unit needs the support and cooperation of all local residents in to stop the spread of COVID-19 throughout the region.

For anyone who might be questioning why these enhanced measures are necessary, Dr. Oglaza said, "It is important to understand that we have not only seen a significant increase in COVID-19 cases, but a significant increase in variants of concern (VOCs) in our region and surrounding areas. Evidence shows that VOCs may be up to 70 per cent more contagious and may cause more severe illness than the original strain of COVID-19. With this increased risk, more than ever it's important to stay strong, stay vigilant, and continue following all public health and workplace safety measures to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in our community and avoid unknowingly bringing variants of the virus to Hastings and Prince Edward counties."

The day after HPEPH announced its additional measures, the government of Ontario announced that starting on April 3 the entire province would enter a 28-day lockdown.

Highlighting the urgency of the situation, and the need for additional restrictions, the province indicated that from March 26 to March 28, provincial case rates increased by 7.7 per cent to 101.1 cases per 100,000 people. The government also pointed out how the current COVID-19 related Intensive Care Unit admissions are already above those during the peak of the second wave; and, how hospitals in regional hotspots would need to further scale down scheduled non-essential surgeries.

COVID-19 related ICU admissions are projected to exceed 650 beds in a few weeks. The province also drew attention to how these increases are being driven by COVID-19 variants, because: they are transmitted more easily; and, because they result in a higher risk of death and hospitalization, including in younger populations.

Explaining why the provincial lockdown is necessary, Ontario's chief medical officer of health Dr. David Williams said, "In the last few weeks a significant increase in COVID-19 cases and variants of concern has been observed across Ontario which has put considerable strain on our public health and health care systems. Implementing a province-wide shutdown is needed to bring the third wave of this pandemic under control so that we can save lives, keep our education system open and allow our vaccination program to take hold."