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COVID-19 vaccine passport required at certain businesses starting Sept. 22

By Nate Smelle

Premier Doug Ford held a press conference on Wednesday, Sept. 1 to inform Ontarians that within three weeks, all residents of the province would need to provide proof of full vaccination against COVID-19 prior to accessing certain businesses and settings. Under this new measure, beginning on Wednesday, Sept. 22 Ontarians will be required to be fully vaccinated ? two doses plus 14 days ? and show proof of vaccination along with photo ID to enter establishments such as: restaurants and bars; nightclubs (including outdoor areas of the establishment); meeting and event spaces, such as banquet halls and conference/convention centres; facilities used for sports and fitness activities and personal fitness training, such as gyms, fitness and recreational facilities (with the exception of youth recreational sport); sporting events; casinos, bingo halls and gaming establishments; concerts, music festivals, theatres and cinemas; strip clubs, bathhouses and sex clubs; and, racing venues (e.g., horse racing). Along with these measures, indoor masking policies will continue to remain in place.

?We are already seeing a rise in the number of cases of COVID-19 as we head into the fall,? said Dr. Kieran Moore, Ontario's chief medical officer of health. ?As we enter the last mile push to increase vaccination rates, the introduction of a vaccine certificate is an important step to give people the tools to limit further spread of the virus so that we can ensure the safety of all Ontarians while keeping the province open and operational.?

The Ford government's decision to move forward with what they are calling the ?enhanced COVID-19 vaccine certificate? system comes as the province is dealing with the ?delta-driven? fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Having previously voiced his opposition to the idea of a COVID-19 vaccine passport, Ford explained why he now considers the document to be the ?best chance? to slow the spread of the virus.

?It's no secret, this is something that I did not want to do,? the premier told reporters at the press conference. ?This is a serious step that we're not taking lightly, and I know this is going to be very difficult for some people. And let me be clear: this is a temporary tool that we won't use for a day longer than we have to. But, after talking to Dr. Moore, I know that this is what we have to do right now in the face of this fourth wave, because these certificates are necessary to keep our hospital safe, and to avoid another lockdown. This is the right decision for our kids, our businesses, and for all Ontarians.?

According to the premier's office, the new requirements are meant to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, and ?encourage every last eligible Ontarian to get their shot, which is critical to protecting the province's hospital capacity, while also supporting businesses with the tools they need to keep customers safe, stay open and minimize disruptions.?

The requirements will not apply to settings where people receive: medical care; food from grocery stores; medical supplies; outdoor settings where the risk of transmission is lower, including patios, with the exception of outdoor nightclub spaces given the risk associated with the setting.

Those who are unable to receive the vaccine due to medical exemptions will be permitted entry into restricted areas with a doctor's note until recognized medical exemptions can be integrated as part of a digital vaccine certificate. The government also indicated that children who are 11 years of age and younger and unable to be vaccinated will also be exempted from these requirements.

Despite these exemptions, Ford acknowledged that he still expects there to be backlash from individuals who consider the COVID-19 vaccination certificate to be a limitation on people's freedom. Attempting to steer these individuals away from taking their frustrations out on front-line workers, he said, ?If people want to get angry they want to protest come down to Queen's Park. They can protest, they can do cartwheels, do whatever they want down here; but, please, these people are just trying to earn a living they're just trying to do their job. You know what's so sad about this whole situation ? you know this virus, you know it has split up friendships, it is divided co-workers, it has divided families. That's the hardest thing we, I, deal with. You know, it's heart-wrenching, and we need to stay united. United we're a lot stronger than we are when we're divided.?

From Sept. 22 until Oct. 22 Ontarians can provide the vaccination receipt (paper or PDF) they receive after getting vaccinated, along with their valid photo ID, such as a driver's license or health card. As of Oct. 22, Ontario will switch to an enhanced digital vaccine receipt that features a QR code, which is said will make it a safer, and more secure means of proving full vaccination. In addition, the province is going to launch a new app to make it easier and more convenient for businesses and organizations to read and verify that a digital vaccine receipt is valid, while protecting people's privacy.

?Combining the use of a QR code with a trusted, made in Ontario verifier app will help support the province's health measures,? said Kaleed Rasheed, Associate Minister of Digital Government. ?These tools will provide a simpler, faster, and better way to prove vaccination status that is both convenient and secure ? while also supporting businesses with an easy validation process.?

Proof of vaccination can be downloaded and/or printed from the provincial booking portal; or by calling the Provincial Vaccine Booking Line at: 1-833-943-3900.