

COVID-19 restrictions ease as Ontario enters Stage-2 of reopening

By Nate Smelle

With the rate of COVID-19 infection slowing, and key public health indicators continuing to improve with the increasing number of vaccinated Ontarians, the province moved into Step-2 of its Roadmap to Reopen at 12:01 a.m. on Wednesday, June 30.

The province's team of experts advising the government in their response to the pandemic have been monitoring several factors pertaining to the public's health and within Ontario's health-care system. Standing as a testament to Ontarians' eagerness to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, by June 23 more than 76 per cent of the provincial population 18-years-old and over have received one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine; and, more than 29 per cent had received their second dose. Overall, more than 13.3 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been administered throughout the province.

"Due to a continued improvement in key indicators, Ontario is ready to enter Step-2 of our roadmap allowing us to safely and gradually ease public health measures while continuing to stop the spread of COVID-19," said Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health.

"Thank you to the Ontarians who rolled up their sleeves to help us reach this exciting milestone. Every dose administered brings us one step closer to the things we've missed, so please sign up to receive the vaccine when it's your turn."

The province also needed to meet certain targets in relation to the number of hospitalizations, ICU occupancy and the weekly cases incidence rates before entering Step-2. During Step-1, between the period of June 11 and June 17, the provincial case rate decreased by 24.6 per cent. As of June 22, the number of patients with COVID-19 in ICUs was 305, including 10 patients from Manitoba, as compared to 450 two weeks earlier.

Expressing his appreciation for the role front-line health-care workers have played in speeding up the reopening, Premier Doug Ford said, "Because of the tireless work of our health care heroes, and the record setting success of our vaccine rollout, we are able to move into Step-2 ahead of schedule on June 30 with the support of our public health experts. We are proceeding safely with the reopening of our province and will continue to work around the clock until the job is done."

In a press release from the government of Ontario issued on June 24, the province indicated that Step-2 will focus on reopening more outdoor activities and limited indoor services with small numbers of people where face coverings are worn, and with other restrictions in place. Activities to be permitted under Step-2 include, but are not limited to:

? Outdoor social gatherings and organized public events with up to 25 people; ? Indoor social gatherings and organized public events with up to five people; ? Essential and other select retail permitted at 50 per cent capacity; ? Non-essential retail permitted at 25 per cent capacity; ? Personal care services where face coverings can be worn at all times, and at 25 per cent capacity and other restrictions; ? Outdoor dining with up to six people per table, with exceptions for larger households and other restrictions; ? Indoor religious services, rites, or ceremonies, including wedding services and funeral services permitted at up to 25 per cent capacity of the particular room; ? Outdoor fitness classes limited to the number of people who can maintain three metres of physical distance; ? Outdoor sports without contact or modified to avoid contact, with no specified limit on number of people or teams participating, with restrictions; ? Overnight camps for children operating in a manner consistent with the safety guidelines produced by the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health; ? Outdoor sport facilities with spectators permitted at 25 per cent capacity; ? Outdoor concert venues, theatres and cinemas, with spectators permitted at 25 per cent capacity; ? Outdoor horse racing and motor speedways, with spectators permitted at 25 per cent capacity; ? Outdoor fairs, rural exhibitions, festivals, permitted at 25 per cent capacity and with other restrictions.

In order to allow the most recent vaccinations to reach their full effectiveness; and, to allow for key public health and health care indicators to be accurately evaluated, Ontario will remain in Step-2 for a period of approximately 21 days. Step-3 of the Roadmap to

Reopen will not kick in until the province determines it to be safe to do so.

Appointment bookings are being managed directly by the province. Those who are eligible to receive the vaccine are encouraged to book online at: www.ontario.ca/bookvaccine. Individuals unable to book online are advised to contact the Provincial Vaccine Booking Line at: 1-888-999-6488?. The booking line is available seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Those who do not have a photo ID health card will be required to book by phone.