

## Ontario phased reopening starting Jan. 31

BY MICHAEL RILEY Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

On Jan. 24, there were 4,790 new cases added to the total number of Ontarians with COVID-19, which stands at 1,001,455 as of that day, according to the Ontario government's website on COVID-19 cases. However, officials caution that due to the general population not having access to PCR tests, that number may be much higher. PCR tests or polymerase chain reaction tests are the most common type of test used in Canada to detect COVID-19, according to the Canada.ca website on COVID-19 testing. The PCR test is a molecular test that detects the virus genetic material. The province counted 3,861 that were hospitalized, with 615 people in the ICU. On the plus side, 88.9 per cent of Ontarians 12 years of age and older have been fully vaccinated, while those five years of age and older, the fully vaccinated figure is 82.9 per cent. Ontarians 18 years of age and older with a booster shot is at 50.4 per cent. To date, the total number of vaccinations administered in the province is 30,100,272. According to the Hastings Prince Edward Public Health, as of Jan. 24, there were 103 new high-risk cases of COVID-19 in the region, 656 active high-risk cases in the region and 21 outbreaks in high-risk settings (like long term care facilities). There have been 31 deaths, and 17 people are hospitalized with COVID-19, four of those are currently in the ICU. At the start of last week, Pfizer's new antiviral pill for COVID-19, Paxlovid, was approved by Health Canada. Called Paxlovid, it is a combination therapy, comprising nirmatrelvir and ritonavir, with patients taking two of the former tablets and one of the latter tablets orally twice a day for five days. It should be taken within five days of COVID-19 symptom onset. The active ingredient in Paxlovid, nirmatrelvir, hinders the replication of the COVID-19 virus. According to Pfizer's clinical trials, the drug was nearly 90 per cent effective at preventing hospitalizations and deaths in patients who are at high risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Anyone considering taking Paxlovid should discuss it with their healthcare professional to assess the benefit to risk ratio, as there are some drug-drug interactions that could cause severe or life-threatening adverse reactions in patients, or a loss of therapeutic effect, according to the Canada.ca website on Paxlovid and its effects. Canada's chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam, said that priority for this new drug will be given to immuno-compromised people, those 80 years of age and older whose vaccinations are out of date, those 60 years of age and older living in rural or underserved communities and those from First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities whose vaccinations are out of date. While Ontario has been in a modified Step Two in its Roadmap to Reopen since Jan. 5, the provincial government announced last week that it would be relaxing some of these restrictions with a phased approach to reopening from Jan. 31 until March 14. There will be 21 days between each step that eases restrictions. Beginning on Jan. 31 at 12:01 a.m., social gathering limits will increase to 10 people indoors and 25 people outdoors, capacity limits will be increased or maintained at 50 per cent in indoor public settings like restaurants, bars, other food and drink establishments (without dance facilities), retailers including grocery stores and pharmacies, shopping malls, non-spectator areas of sports and recreational fitness facilities, cinemas, meeting and event spaces, recreational amenities and amusement parks, museums, galleries, aquariums, and zoos, casinos, bingo halls and other gaming establishments, religious services, rites or ceremonies and allowing spectator areas of sporting events, concert venues and theatres to operate at 50 per cent seated capacity or 500 people, whichever is less. Enhanced proof of vaccination and other requirements will continue to apply. As of Feb. 21, social gathering limits will increase to 25 people indoors and 100 people outdoors. Capacity limits will be removed in indoor public settings where proof of vaccination is required, in such places as; restaurants, indoor sports and recreational facilities, cinemas and other settings that choose to opt-in to proof of vaccination requirements. Spectator capacity at sporting events, concert venues and theatres will be allowed at 50 per cent, and indoor public settings where proof of vaccination is not required, capacity will be limited to the number of people that can maintain a two-metre distance from each other. Indoor religious services, rites or ceremonies will be limited to the number of people that can maintain two metres of distance from each other with no limit if proof of vaccination is required. Higher risk settings will see their indoor capacity limits increased to 25 per cent, including nightclubs, wedding receptions in meeting or event spaces where there is dancing and bathhouses and sex clubs. Enhanced proof of vaccination and other requirements will continue to be applicable in existing settings. Capacity limits will be fully lifted in all indoor public settings as of March 14, with proof of vaccination still required in addition to other regular measures. Religious services, rites or ceremonies will also see their capacity limits removed. Fifty people will now be able to gather indoors, while there will be no limit on the number of people that can gather outdoors.