

**For Information**

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REPORT TITLE: **Review of the Region's Pandemic Experience**

FROM: Kathryn Lockyer, Interim Commissioner of Corporate Services

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**OBJECTIVE**

To provide a summary of the Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) activities undertaken in support of the Region's COVID-19 response for the time period of late January 2020 to September 2020 and to provide an overview of key lessons learned thus far.

This report has been prepared from the perspective of the Regional Emergency Operations Centre and does not speak to specific Public Health response actions or of detailed financial implications.

**REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

- The REOC was activated to coordinate the Region's COVID-19 planning, response and recovery efforts.
  - The Regional response has drawn upon each department and division and a broad range of external partners and stakeholders.
  - The scale, duration, complexity and dynamic nature of this response surpasses all previous Regional responses to significant events and emergencies.
  - The REOC will remain active for the foreseeable future to support planning and response actions through the second wave along with planning and implementation of recovery plans.
  - Key findings from the Region's COVID-19 response will inform planned updates to the Region of Peel Emergency Plan.
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**DISCUSSION**

**1. Background**

On January 25, 2020, Public Health activated a team (the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre) implementing the Incident Management System (IMS) to prepare for the Coronavirus reported in Wuhan, China. Staff from Regional Emergency Management (REM) and Marketing and Communications was asked to support the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre as of January 29, 2020 as the effects of Coronavirus (COVID-19) began to present themselves. At that time, Public Health was the Regional lead in coordinating the response given the nature of the event.

From the end of January to the first week of March, response and planning efforts focused on case and contact management, public and health sector messaging and preparing guidance material for internal and external stakeholders. REM established a group of

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external emergency management stakeholders to provide situational awareness and share information including, Public Health guidance and to facilitate information requests. This group comprised of emergency management staff from each of the local municipalities and Peel Regional Police and would later be expanded into the Emergency Management Task Force.

REM provides advice and support to the Public Health Emergency Operation Centre (EOC). It also serves as the conduit to the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre (PEOC) and emergency management programs at other municipalities, including York, Durham, Halton, Niagara, Hamilton and Toronto. In addition, REM along with other departments support federal and provincial initiatives such as those for individuals who had concluded their quarantine at Canadian Forces Base Trenton and were returning or travelling through Peel Region.

During the first week of March a steady rise in COVID-19 cases and consequences such as school closures and border closures resulted in the Executive Leadership Team directing that the REOC be fully activated to coordinate the corporate response to COVID-19.

In the following days, senior levels of government implemented many federal and provincial measures, including the suspension of school and childcare operations, self-isolation for anyone who had travelled internationally and initial physical distancing and gathering guidelines. On March 18, 2020, the Regional Chair issued a Declaration of Emergency due to the effects of COVID-19 on the community and Regional services. The Region's declaration followed the provincially declared emergency on March 17, 2020. The Town of Caledon and the Cities of Brampton and Mississauga also issued Declarations of Emergency. The Region's Declaration of Emergency remains in effect at the time this report was prepared. Appendix IV provides a high-level summary of the timeline associated with this event.

### **2. REOC Activation and Initial Response**

The full REOC structure was implemented with all IMS positions filled (Appendix I). Additional roles were also created within the IMS structure to support the response including:

- Deputy Emergency Information Officer
- Public Health Liaison Officer
- Health System Liaison Officer
- Risk and Audit Advisor
- Privacy Advisor
- Legal Advisor

The Regional Policy Group was activated and continues to provide strategic guidance, support and decision approval to the REOC. The Regional Policy Group is comprised of individuals in the following roles:

- Chief Administrative Officer
- Commissioner of Corporate Services
- Commissioner of Digital and Information Services
- Commissioner of Finance and Chief Financial Officer
- Commissioner of Health Services
- Commissioner of Human Services
- Commissioner of Public Works

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The REOC identified the following four objectives to guide the response:

- Protect
  - Protect Regional employees and residents from COVID-19, particularly our most vulnerable community members
  - Promote the safety and well-being of Regional employees during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Support
  - Support the Public Health response to COVID-19, including directives from the Medical Officer of Health
  - Enable critical work across Regional services
  - Support the broader health system response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Coordinate and Communicate
  - Provide trusted and timely communications to Regional employees, Council and community members
  - Coordinate the COVID-19 response with local municipalities and community stakeholders
- Deliver
  - Ensure the delivery of essential services
  - Adapt to rapidly changing service needs and impacts
  - Ensure accountability and implementation of risk management practices
  - Implement business recovery planning

Several departmental and divisional emergency operations centres (EOC) were activated to coordinate response elements specific to those areas of service. These EOCs were linked to the REOC and the previously established Public Health EOC and worked closely with one another to address issues, concerns and provide mutual support. Through this approach, a rapid assessment of resourcing needs and availability was regularly conducted, which resulted in the ability to ensure there was no duplication, appropriately allocate resources, and share information. Further discussion is contained in Appendix III.

### 3. Coordination and Communications Efforts

#### a) Virtual Regional Emergency Operations Centre

Many of the Provincial Orders issued as part of the Provincial Declaration of Emergency influenced the actions of the REOC and the way the REOC functioned. Under the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*, each municipality must designate and equip a physical Emergency Operations Centre. There is currently no legislative requirement for a municipality to have the capability to operate a virtual Emergency Operations Centre.

Due to physical distancing and maximum gathering requirements stemming from Provincial Orders, the REOC utilized new technologies to coordinate and conduct its activities. Technology facilitated the timing and coordination of meetings with stakeholders and other entities, which is critical to a successful response.

The technology available and in use by the REOC has been largely sufficient to meet current needs. However, there is opportunity to investigate and possibly implement dedicated emergency operations centre software that would enable greater virtual

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coordination of activities with Regional services and programs, as well as external stakeholders such as local municipal partners and Peel Regional Police.

REM continues to monitor any changes to the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act* for future planning needs and areas of improvement based on COVID-19 experiences.

### **b) Formation of Task Forces & Working Groups**

Given the breadth of internal and external stakeholders involved in both the Regional and municipal responses, the REOC convened and led task forces and working groups to exchange information. A summary of the Task Forces and Working Groups is contained in Appendix II.

### **c) Support to Executive Teams**

Members of the REOC Command and staff supported regularly scheduled Mayors and CAOs conference calls that also included the Medical Officer of Health, Regional Chair, and senior leadership representatives of Trillium Health Partners and William Osler Health Centre. This group was convened to discuss and coordinate broad strategic actions and identify potential issues and challenges throughout the COVID-19 response. Where appropriate and necessary, additional stakeholders participated in the discussions, including representatives from Ontario Health. Support for this group is ongoing.

Representatives of the REOC also participated on the Headwaters Health Care Centre emergency table, Ontario Health Tables and other stakeholder groups, as needed. While a number of these groups have concluded, some remain active and are regularly joined by REOC members.

### **d) Information Needs**

Throughout the pandemic, the Region has experienced a significant demand to share timely information related to all aspects of the COVID-19 response. Over and above case counts and daily changes, internal and external stakeholders sought direction, guidance and best practices from both the REOC and Public Health, often on urgent timelines.

Since the activation of the REOC, communications have been a significant ongoing effort. A comprehensive communications strategy is in place with ongoing messaging to the public, stakeholders, Regional employees and members of Regional Council. Coordination of information sources, fact-checking, plain language use and translation into top languages was also undertaken. Guidance from the REOC to Regional employees continues to be issued at least bi-weekly. A dedicated COVID-19 resource site has been established and is maintained daily for both the public and staff. Information and data dashboards, guidance materials, videos and social media messages have been created.

In the rapidly changing environment in the early days of the pandemic, the REOC quickly established clarity on Peel Public Health, provincial, federal and international sources to inform communications.

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Whenever possible, Regional and local municipal Councils became a part of messaging efforts, as well as status reports and information from other levels of government and key stakeholders, such as policing/ enforcement leads.

Through several of the established task forces, the REOC has streamlined information sharing with internal and external stakeholders. A survey of emergency partners was conducted to seek their feedback. The survey confirmed:

- ongoing information sharing was essential to the response efforts and success,
- continued availability and collaboration with spokespeople and up-to-date information was required, and
- strong collaboration between the Region and the municipal partners should continue.

### **e) Social Responsibility**

Many community agencies and stakeholders who had not previously been part of the response to significant events or emergencies now had a role in the broader COVID-19 response. Through the establishment of the Community Response Table, many of these stakeholders were able to identify their needs to the Region. Where possible, supports were provided in the form of guidance, collaboration and in some cases, funding or the provision of non-medical personal protective equipment.

## **4. Protective and Supporting Measures**

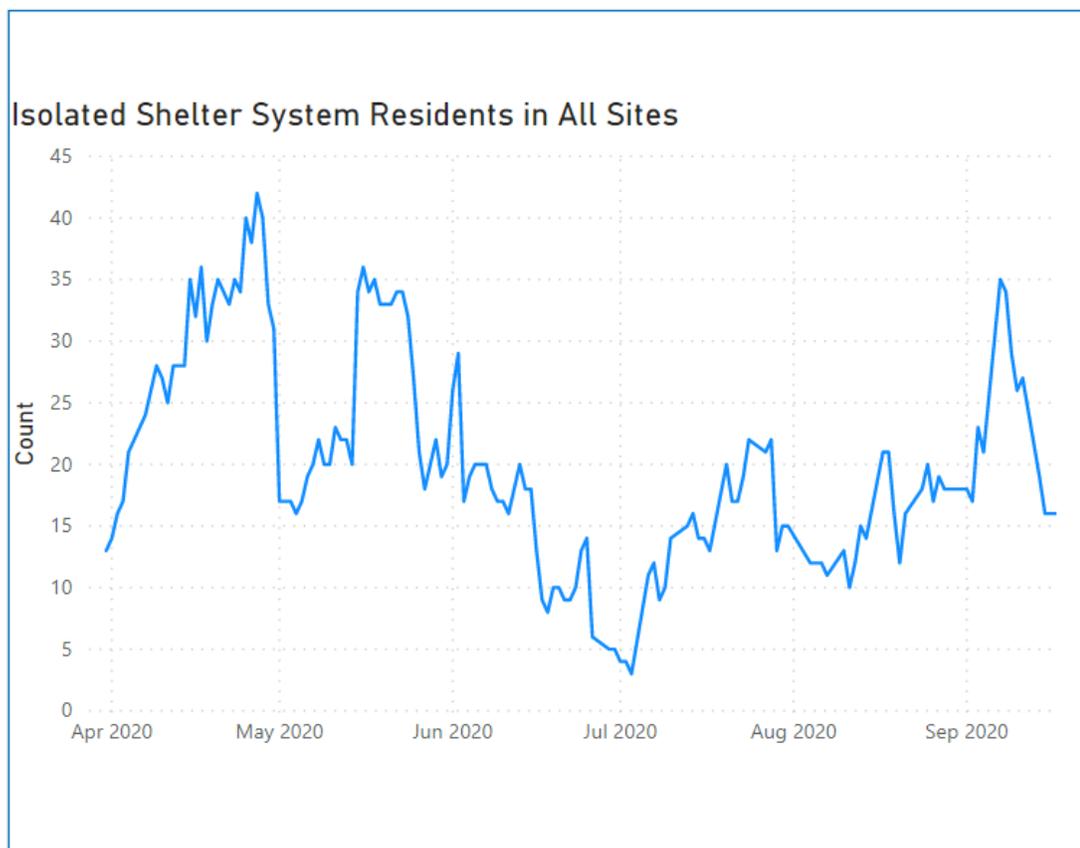
The following examples are only a handful of the many activities, decisions, actions and issues that were addressed by the REOC and Regional Policy Group during the ongoing response phase.

### **a) Isolation and Recovery Supports for Homeless Individuals**

The REOC supported Human Services staff with the establishment of both isolation and recovery sites for the Region's homeless population to care for those waiting for results or with COVID-19 and mitigate the risk of viral spread to residents using shelters. This process included Regional programs and municipal partners working together to identify, establish and evaluate sites.

The following graph provides a summary of the level of usage of the isolation site from April until mid-September. The facility remains in use.

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### b) Emergency Child Care Centres

With the province-wide mandated closure of childcare centres, many frontline workers faced limited childcare options which limited their ability to work. As a result of provincial direction to create emergency childcare centres, staff in Human Services led an initiative to work with licensed childcare providers to open 14 emergency childcare sites across the Region and provide service to over 320 children. In this effort, the REOC's role was to support the supply of required PPE and work with municipal Fire and Emergency Services to coordinate fire inspections before each site became operational.

### c) First Responder Supports

Efforts were also undertaken to address operational concerns of first response partners related to the locations of COVID-19 positive individuals while balancing the requirements of the *Personal Health Information Protection Act*. This issue was eventually escalated to the provincial government, who recognized both concerns and subsequently issued a Provincial Order to enable limited access to this information by first responder dispatchers. This order has since expired.

### d) Employee Temporary Housing and Isolation Program

The Region established a Temporary Housing and Isolation Program to support employees from Paramedics Services, Long Term Care, Public Health and other departments who have to self-isolate and monitor their conditions while still working but are unable to do so in their own homes. While the use of this program has tapered off

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since the summer, during the height of COVID-19 consequences in long term care settings, several employees used these services.

### **e) Employee Physical and Mental Health Supports**

Recognizing the significant impacts on employees' work and home life due to the stresses of COVID-19, Human Resources has implemented and leveraged a wide range of support mechanisms through both the Region's Employee and Family Assistance Program and in-house supports. These supports are readily available to all employees through several platforms and have been widely successful.

## **5. Service Delivery Measures**

Many efforts were undertaken to ensure that key functions and services were sufficiently resourced throughout the response. In some cases, adjustments to services were a function of regulatory requirements issued by the Province. The following examples are some of the key service delivery measures that have been undertaken in the response so far.

### **a) Employee Redeployments**

Numerous challenges have developed and been addressed over the course of the Region's COVID-19 response. Over and above the financial impacts to the Region, Regional staff have supported the ongoing response and recovery efforts. During the response to this event, there has been an ongoing need to redeploy employees to other divisions or departments for periods ranging from a few weeks to several months.

Every department and division has provided some level of support to both the response and recovery efforts. Individual programs have been halted or repurposed and, in many cases, individual employees have performed other duties for several months. At the peak period of redeployments, over 730 employees provided support to other departments, divisions and programs.

Business Continuity Plans (BCP) and processes were used to guide service adjustments, as needed, and redeployment activities. BCPs were continually updated and amended to identify the ongoing critical needs of the COVID-19 response. Redeployments were either formal (between departments) or informal (within departments) and ranged in duration from a few days to several months.

Several policies and procedures were introduced, reviewed and amended per Provincial Orders and public health guidance. Throughout the redeployment process, the health and wellbeing of Regional employees and residents remained a key factor in decision making.

### **b) Donations and Personal Protective Equipment Management**

The REOC's Logistics section coordinated the procurement of additional PPE in close collaboration with key program areas. The Logistics section also managed material donations from the community, including much needed PPE supplies, along with substantial donations of personal care products and snacks for frontline workers.

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### **c) Recovery Planning**

The recovery phase to COVID-19 is equally essential to the response phase and often runs concurrently. The Regional Policy Group struck the Demobilization and Recovery task force to develop an organization wide recovery plan. The Demobilization and Recovery Task Force is comparable in scope and complexity to the response activities of the REOC and has worked in close collaboration with the REOC.

The Task Force comprises leads from each Regional department and supporting members across many Regional divisions. As part of the regular planning sessions, best practices from Public Health, Human Resources, Facilities, Health and Safety, Technology, and Communications have been factored into the recovery plan.

A Remote Work First approach was established to ensure safety and physical distancing at Regional worksites. The reopening of some Regional facilities commenced on September 23, 2020 and adhered to federal, provincial and local public health guidance recommendations with respect to workplaces, public settings and other infection prevention and control measures. Some employees returned to the workplace as of September 2020. Worksites were physically adjusted, including a broad range of measures and protocols including, but not limited to, overall building occupancy, regular and deep cleaning protocols, screening, protocols should there be a workplace exposure, use and booking of workstations and measures for incidental visits.

## **6. Lessons Learned**

There have been lessons learned throughout the response and recovery. There will be more learnings as we continue with the response and recovery and assess the outcomes of the efforts. Initial lessons learned have been identified throughout the response and learnings have been applied. These lessons can also be applied to future significant events. Appendix III contains a summary of key lessons learned to date.

## **7. Planned Next Steps**

The REOC will remain active for the foreseeable future to coordinate ongoing planning response activities. The REOC will work collaboratively with the Regional Policy Group and Recovery Task Force to ensure efforts are aligned and appropriately resourced. Collaboration and information sharing with external stakeholders, including local municipal partners will continue.

The REOC will monitor and adjust priorities as necessary and appropriate should a resurgence of COVID-19 consequences materialize.

The Chief Administrative Officer and the Medical Officer of Health will continue to provide regular and as needed updates to Regional Council.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Guidance has been provided to the REOC through the Finance and Administration Section Chief, the Advisor (Legal Services) and Advisor (Risk & Audit) related to possible financial implications around individual decisions and policy changes. Through the Chief Financial Officer, monitoring and reporting of financial considerations and status reports have been provided to Regional Council.

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### CONCLUSION

The Regional response to COVID-19 has surpassed the scale and scope of all previous significant events or emergencies, with supports having been mobilized across every department and division since March. While many efforts have been undertaken to abate the further spread of COVID-19 within our community, these and other measures will need to be sustained for the foreseeable future to further manage the risk. In some instances, new measures and approaches may be needed which will be supported by the Regional Emergency Operations Centre, Regional Policy Group, Public Health and the Recovery Task Force.

### APPENDICES

Appendix I - Current REOC IMS Structure  
Appendix II – REOC Task Force and Working Group Summaries  
Appendix III – Initial Lessons Learned  
Appendix IV – Event Timeline to Stage III Reopening  
Appendix V – Provincial Orders Status

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#### ***Reviewed and/or approved in workflow by:***

Department Commissioner and Division Directors.

Final approval is by the Chief Administrative Officer.



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J. Baker, Chief Administrative Officer