
For Information

REPORT TITLE: **Update on Implementation of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program and the Impact of COVID-19 on Service Delivery**

FROM: Nancy Polsinelli, Commissioner of Health Services
Lawrence C. Loh, MD MPH FCFP FRCPC FACPM, Medical Officer of Health

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the implementation of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program ('the OSDCP') as per Resolution 2020-940, and on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the delivery of the program.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- In November 2019, the provincial government launched the OSDCP to provide routine dental care to eligible low-income seniors living in Ontario. In the Region of Peel, the OSDCP services are provided at three Community Health Centre (CHCs) locations. Since its inception, approximately 1,700 seniors have received services under the OSDCP in the Region of Peel.
 - Peel Public Health implemented the OSDCP services in November 2019. As service delivery was beginning to increase, the Ontario provincial government declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19 thus closing dental offices and limiting the OSDCP services to emergency cases only.
 - Service-related impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic at our partner CHCs have resulted in an influx of seniors accessing the OSDCP for emergency services. Service capacity has also been reduced due to the implementation of additional Infection Prevention and Control measures to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission.
 - To increase and support timely access to the OSDCP emergency service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic, Peel Public Health provided one-time funding to increase emergency capacity at three CHC locations in December 2020. The funds are managed within Peel Public Health's program budget.
 - In response to barriers to accessing and implementing the OSDCP in the Region of Peel, Peel Public Health has committed to developing a comprehensive advocacy strategy aimed at ensuring the implementation of the OSDCP services meets the needs of Peel seniors and demand for services.
-

Update on Implementation of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program and the Impact of COVID-19 on Service Delivery

DISCUSSION

1) Background

a) Importance and Impact of Seniors Oral Health Care

Oral health care for seniors is an essential component of overall health, including helping to prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. Maintaining good oral hygiene and having access to regular professional dental care allows for a greater quality of life. However, seniors are less likely to see a dentist once they have entered retirement and are therefore more likely to have poorer oral health and greater treatment needs. Low-income seniors are also more likely to visit a family physician and the emergency department multiple times for oral health-related conditions, often relying on antibiotics and pain medications to address them; this creates unnecessary strain to the health care system. Investment in oral health care for seniors will help to alleviate the burden on the healthcare system and contribute to the Ontario Premier's Council vision to end hallway medicine.

b) The Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program

In November 2019, the provincial government launched phase 1 of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program ('the OSDCP') OSDCP to provide routine dental care to eligible low-income seniors living in Ontario. Eligible seniors can seek services anywhere in the province.

The *Ontario Public Health Standards Oral Health Protocol, 2019* requires public health units to provide dental care to eligible seniors under the OSDCP. The OSDCP is in alignment with Peel Public Health's 2020-2029 strategic priority of advancing health equity as well as the 2018-2022 Term of Council Priority to support healthy aging by enhancing seniors' supports and services to optimize quality of life.

c) Transition from the Seniors' Dental Program to the OSDCP

The Region of Peel previously funded the Seniors' Dental Program (SDP) to provide free dental treatment to eligible low-income seniors for over a decade (2008-2019). Each year, approximately 800 seniors were provided access to one full course of dental treatment, available once per lifetime.

Since the inception of the OSDCP in November 2019, Peel Public Health is transitioning seniors from the SDP to the OSDCP. As of January 2021, approximately 50 clients still require oral health service to complete their full course of treatment through the SDP.

2) Implementation of the OSDCP in Peel

a) Partnership with Community Health Centres

Under the OSDCP, services are accessed through clinics operated by public health units, CHCs or Aboriginal Health Access Centres. Services cannot be accessed through private dental offices. In the Region of Peel, the OSDCP services are offered at three CHC locations: (1) Health n' Smiles Dental Clinic, (2) Four Corners Health Centre (both run by WellFort Community Health Services), and (3) East Mississauga Community

Update on Implementation of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program and the Impact of COVID-19 on Service Delivery

Health Centre. Since its inception, approximately 1,700 seniors have received services under the OSDCP in the Region of Peel.

b) Update on Capital Projects

In August 2019, the Board of Health for Peel Public Health applied to the Ministry of Health for seven capital projects to address the growing and continued demand for service. In January 2020, Peel Public Health was approved up to \$1,143,000 in one-time funding to support two of the seven capital projects: (1) Mobile Dental Clinic (\$885,000) and (2) Expansion of WellFort Community Health Services Dental Clinic (\$258,000). The impact of not receiving approval for all requested capital projects will result in insufficient dental infrastructure to adequately meet the dental health needs of low-income seniors in Peel.

The completed expansion of the WellFort Community Health Services Dental Clinic included the construction of 2 additional operatories at the Health n' Smiles clinic. Due to capacity constraints caused by Peel Public Health's COVID-19 pandemic response, the procurement of a mobile dental bus for the Mobile Dental clinic has been paused.

3) Challenges to Service Delivery

a) Limited Capacity at Partner Community Health Centres

Much of the CHCs dental infrastructure is utilized near capacity to provide dental care for the Healthy Smiles Ontario (HSO) program as well as other public programs (e.g. Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program). As a result, there is little ability to leverage the existing infrastructure to accommodate the OSDCP. Peel Public Health anticipates that annual uptake for the OSDCP services is approximately 20,794, which is significantly greater than the Ministry of Health's (Ministry) estimate of 6,938 eligible seniors in Peel accessing services annually. As of January 31, 2021, the Ministry reported that more than 8,000 seniors living in Peel have received their OSDCP cards allowing them to access the program. As Peel's population continues to age and grow, it is projected that there will not be capacity to address the OSDCP service demand in the Region of Peel. While qualifying OSDCP clients can seek services anywhere in the province, it is important to note that most clients receiving Peel's OSDCP services are residents of the Region of Peel.

b) Barrier to Accessing Care via Private Dental Providers

The OSDCP does not permit a fee-for-service payment model, which is the standard billing method in the sector. The inability to work with private dental providers with a fee-for-service model restricts the OSDCP's ability to meet the growing demand for services in Peel. A solution is needed to ensure equitable and effortless access to the OSDCP, including provisions for working with private dental providers.

4) Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Service Provision

Implementation of Phase 1 (a soft launch) of the OSDCP in Peel had been instituted for three months before the COVID-19 response came to the forefront of Public Health priorities. Routine dental services at our partner CHCs were suspended in March 2020 due

Update on Implementation of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program and the Impact of COVID-19 on Service Delivery

to the COVID-19 pandemic; with only emergency dental services continuing, on a case-by-case basis.

Routine dental services resumed at the CHCs in summer 2020. However, their capacity was reduced by approximately 40 per cent due to the implementation of additional Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) measures to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The cancellation of routine appointments led to an increase in oral health emergency cases among clients and therefore, an influx of seniors seeking the OSDCP for emergency services. This has further decreased the ability to provide routine dental care.

A waitlist for the OSDCP services (routine and emergency) continues to increase while capacity to provide them decreases. As of January 31, 2021, there were approximately 2600 seniors on the waitlist to receive the OSDCP services, with several seniors added each day. The current demand for the OSDCP may be underrepresented as seniors, especially those with comorbidities, are at higher risk for suffering severe illness from COVID-19 and may be less likely to seek routine oral health care for fear of COVID-19 exposure.

The Ministry has committed to support ongoing access to dental care for currently enrolled clients by automatically renewing all seniors who were enrolled in the OSDCP in the first benefit year (since November 2019) to remain enrolled in the next benefit year (August 1, 2020 – July 31, 2021).

Due to Peel Public Health's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, shutdown, increased IPAC requirements, hiring pause resulting in staffing vacancies and the inability to initiate service delivery from the mobile dental bus, the OSDCP 2020 budget is expected to be underspent by approximately \$833K.

5) Response to Capacity Constraints

a) Peel Public Health

To increase and support timely access to the OSDCP emergency and urgent service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic, Peel Public Health provided one-time funding to WellFort Community Health Services (up to \$510,000) and East Mississauga Community Health Centre (\$165,000) in December 2020. The funding will provide the necessary services to non-rostered seniors seeking emergency services. This funding will triple emergency capacity at WellFort Community Health Services and double emergency capacity at East Mississauga Community Health Centre. The total funds are managed within Peel Public Health's program budget, by means such as reallocating unspent operational dollars.

b) Peel Public Health Advocacy Efforts

In response to barriers to accessing and implementing the OSDCP in the Region of Peel, a motion to develop a comprehensive advocacy strategy aimed at ensuring the implementation of the OSDCP services meets the needs of Region of Peel seniors and demand for services was endorsed at Regional Council on November 12, 2020. Peel Public Health is developing the advocacy strategy to request that the provincial government provide additional capital and operational funding for the OSDCP and

Update on Implementation of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program and the Impact of COVID-19 on Service Delivery

amend the program design to adequately meet the oral health needs of seniors in Peel. Given the dedicated efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, including a mass vaccination program, at both the regional and provincial levels of government, it is important to consider the strategic timing of advocating to the Ministry of Health.

c) Ministry of Health

In response to public health capacity constraints due to COVID-19, the Ministry announced on November 30, 2020 that public health units may temporarily enter into short-term alternative payment (non-fee-for-service) agreement (e.g., time/sessional rate and service plan vs. annualized salaried agreements) partnership contracts with other dental care providers/specialists to provide the OSDCP services to enrolled clients. This interim approach would allow flexibility for public health units to form partnerships based on patient referral rather than longer-term salaried-based arrangements. However, Peel Public Health does not currently have capacity to create a new funding mechanism for dental providers such as specialists, and no additional funds to pay providers in private practice.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

In 2020, Peel Public Health received \$3,912,800 in base funding to implement the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program.

Due to Peel Public Health's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, shutdown, increased IPAC requirements, hiring pause resulting in staffing vacancies and the inability to initiate service delivery from the mobile dental bus, the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program 2020 budget is expected to be underspent by approximately \$854K.

Peel Public Health is expecting the same provincial base funding in the 2021 budget as in 2020 at \$3,912,800.

CONCLUSION

Peel Public Health anticipates that annual uptake for the OSDCP services is approximately 20,794, which is significantly greater than the Ministry's estimate of 6,938 eligible seniors in Peel accessing services annually. The Ministry reported that more than 7,000 seniors living in Peel have received their OSDCP cards allowing them to access the program. As Peel's population continues to age and grow, it is projected that there will not be sufficient capacity to address the OSDCP service demand in the Region of Peel. Service-related impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in an influx of seniors accessing the OSDCP for emergency services, which has further decreased the availability of routine dental care provision. In response to barriers to accessing and implementing the OSDCP in the Region of Peel, Peel Public Health has committed to developing a comprehensive advocacy strategy aimed at ensuring the implementation of the OSDCP services meets the needs of Peel seniors and demand for services.

Update on Implementation of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program and the Impact of COVID-19 on Service Delivery

For further information regarding this report, please contact Dr. Lawrence Loh, Medical Officer of Health, Ext. 2856, Lawrence.loh@peelregion.ca.

Authored By: Amanda Dass, Health Promoter & Stephanie Tea, Health Promoter

Reviewed and/or approved in workflow by:

Department Commissioners, Division Directors, Medical Officer of Health and Legal Services.