

Study on Canadian response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Municipal Response: An Opportunity to Protect Vulnerable Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Submission to the Standing Committee on Health

Regional Municipality of Peel

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Introduction

Peel's communities are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of May 21, 2020, Peel has had over 3,798 confirmed and probable cases of COVID-19. To date, there have been 31 outbreaks of COVID-19 in Peel institutions (including long term care and retirement homes), with 797 confirmed cases linked to these outbreaks. As the level of government providing immediate supports and services to Canadians, the Region of Peel has taken extraordinary measures to support all residents- especially those that are most vulnerable – to weather the unprecedented public health and economic challenges from COVID-19. The Region has remained operational while safeguarding and coordinating the delivery of essential services and continues to develop responsive and innovative solutions to meet the needs of residents.

A vision to overcome COVID-19

The Region of Peel has a vision for **Community for Life**, focused on ensuring people's lives are improved in their time of need. Through this unprecedented crisis, a collective response with local municipal partners, community-based organizations and many stakeholders across Peel's health system has been required. Together, the Region has navigated many challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic to respond to emerging needs, support coordination, facilitate information sharing and maintain a commitment to collaboration.

To help address ongoing challenges and mitigate the adverse impacts that COVID-19 has had on our community, the Region has supported a coordinated local response through community collaboration and innovation, including initiatives such as:

- Community Response Table to coordinate and fund essential programs and services to vulnerable populations during this pandemic
- Public Health infrastructure to support pandemic response including contact tracing, case management, outbreak management, Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC)
- Isolation and recovery programs for the homeless
- Emergency Child Care
- Health sector collaboration to address LTC challenges, including the deployment of the Region's Paramedic Services to assist with testing and transport

As the trajectory of COVID-19 evolves, the Region remains committed to providing access to services amongst our vulnerable populations, ensuring the sustainability of community-based programs and services, and caring for those in congregate settings in housing, long term care and retirement homes.

Protecting Our Most Vulnerable

While the Region of Peel remains focused on safeguarding the public from the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been substantial effort to deploy targeted measures to help protect those who are the most vulnerable. COVID-19 has had an unprecedented economic impact on all Canadians including Peel residents. The Region has taken steps to provide some financial relief to help offset the immediate challenges that many residents are experiencing, including deferring rate increases and providing a 91-day grace period for water bills and waiving late payment charges. While these measures are helpful, the Region is committed to doing more to meet the changing needs of our residents to ensure necessary resources and supports are in place for our most vulnerable residents.

The unequal costs among the most vulnerable and marginalized in our community that result from social isolation, inadequate housing, lost jobs, food insecurity and other challenges faced, may compound the health impacts of this crisis. The Region has prioritized our vulnerable residents through a population health approach because if we do not adequately support them, they will be at higher risk of COVID-19, which will have far reaching impacts on the rest of Peel.

A. Seniors in Long Term Care

In Peel, seniors aged 65 and older are the fastest growing population with a 30.2% increase between 2011-2016. Protecting our most vulnerable seniors, including those who live in the Region's five long term care homes and 23 additional homes within Peel, is our foremost responsibility. The Region welcomes initiatives, such as the Province of Ontario's recently announced COVID-19 Action Plan for Vulnerable People and federal guidelines and supports for the long-term care sector.

In Peel...

Nearly 62% of the total number of COVID-19 related deaths in Peel were among long term care and retirement home residents (as of May 21, 2020).

Through coordinated efforts between the Region's Public Health and Paramedic Services divisions, as well as congregate settings for seniors such as long term care and retirement homes in Peel (including Peel's five long term care homes) and local hospital partners, there have been coordinated efforts to:

- Implement safety measures including strict screening protocols, infection prevention and control supports, distribution of personal protective equipment and closure of adult day services and community programs
- Redeploy staff from within the Region as well as other organizations to build capacity to provide the necessary services and supports within long term care homes to manage cases and control transmission
- Coordinate efforts to maintain a reliable and sustainable supply of personal protective equipment
- Control new admissions to long term care homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19, especially for homes that are in outbreak.

Through an Integrated Response Planning for Congregate Settings committee, the Region participates in the development and execution of a multi-agency response to support long-term care homes, retirement homes, homeless shelters and other congregate settings. Partners include representatives from the Central West and Mississauga Halton Local Health Integration Networks, Peel Region Public Health, Peel Region Paramedic Services and local hospitals (Trillium Health Partners and William Osler Health System). Support includes a rapid response COVID-19 testing program, infection prevention and control, virtual physician consultation and staffing, where possible.

While safety needs to be our top priority, the Region has also focused on quality of life for residents to keep their minds and spirits healthy. At the Region's own long-term care homes, staff are working to prevent social isolation by using technology to connect residents with families and friends, allowing window visits and encouraging cards and drawings to be sent from loved ones. Given the high proportion of seniors living with dementia in the homes, the Region's focus on person-centred care remains a priority consideration as a part of our care model.

Opportunity for Partnership and Action

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a role for all levels of government to not only address the immediate challenges in long term care (and other congregate settings) but pursue a more sustainable solution to meet the changing needs of the seniors population.

We encourage the federal government to continue recognizing municipalities as important partners in the delivery of long term care services in addition to other essential supports that provide a safe environment in long term care homes, such as public health.

Through targeted investments and strategic direction, in line with the National Seniors Strategy, the federal government can support:

- The redevelopment of infrastructure to enhance infection prevention measures, accessibility, and expansion of necessary health and social services for seniors and their caregivers.
- Enhanced guidelines for specialized support programs (i.e. to build clinical and emotional intelligence capacity within long term care homes to respond to existing pressures such as dementia and responsive behaviours).

Taking these steps are especially important when considering the needs of seniors living with complex conditions like dementia which require extensive supports. When it comes to long term care homes, the municipal sector often fills gaps the private and non-profit services are unable to accommodate, including specialized supports across the system to meet the complex medical needs of seniors.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to fund and sustain these specialized supports has become increasingly important. In supporting and fostering organizations to adopt person-centred care models, the Region encourages continued federal commitment and dedicated investment to support local municipalities and health service providers to improve quality of life outcomes for seniors.

B. Homeless

Decent, safe, and affordable housing is an absolute foundation for a healthy population. Research has shown the critical links between housing and health. Without appropriate and secure housing, the health of Peel's residents will suffer and only worsen the current toll that COVID-19 has had on the Region. Without safe and stable housing, the health of our most precariously housed residents will suffer and add to the existing challenges with mental health, addiction, and overall stress. Without affordable housing or emergency accommodation, many residents may face the difficult decision to skip meals or medications in order to pay the rent.

In Peel...

Nearly 70% of low-income households and 30% of middle-income households live in housing that is unaffordable. Furthermore, Peel has a low vacancy rate (1.2%), leaving more people at risk of finding stable housing they can afford or becoming homeless. These trends are particularly concerning during the COVID-19 crisis.

The Region initiated a system response to protect the community's most vulnerable population by implementing a range of programs and protocols aimed at preventing and managing the spread of COVID-19 in Peel's homeless shelters, transitional housing and street outreach program. The Region's shelter prevention and response program addresses a gap in pandemic planning for the homeless that includes: screening and testing, education on the streets, personal protective equipment, enhanced cleaning of facilities, physical distancing measures in

shelters, and the use of hotels to reduce shelter occupancy and ensure appropriate physical distancing. Approximately half of Peel's shelter population is currently in hotels.

The Region's COVID-19 shelter prevention and response program is focused on providing all requirements of daily living, thereby, increasing the likelihood people will remain physically distanced on site and not travel into the community. The risk of transmission of COVID-19 in shelters and the broader community is further reduced through the provision of primary care supports in the isolation and recovery shelters.

- The isolation site has capacity to shelter up to 100 households who are homeless or can't self-isolate and who have risk factors for exposure or have been tested for COVID-19.
- The recovery site supports homeless individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19 and provides both medical and social supports. It has capacity to support 40 individuals.

In Peel...

The Region has provided 4.3% of the current shelter population in Peel with COVID-19 isolation or recovery housing (as of May 15, 2020).

The Region's COVID-19 shelter prevention and response program is being funded by the federal, provincial and regional levels of government and has received additional provincial and federal supports through the Reaching Home Emergency Funding and Social Services Relief Fund. These supports are critical to meeting the needs of our communities and providing essential services, securing accommodation to reducing shelter overcrowding and allowing isolation (or quarantine) for individuals with a positive or probable COVID-19 status, as well as purchasing essential personal protective equipment to reduce transmission risk.

While positive cases in the homeless population remain low, the Region's housing solution for the homeless population during COVID-19 demonstrates the capacity of all levels of government to work together to address gaps in the current system through innovative and collaborative solutions. However, Peel requires more affordable housing units to meet growing population needs which have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. The needs in Peel are particularly challenging because:

- Peel's population continues to grow rapidly and is aging;
- Peel has experienced rising rates of part-time and temporary employment in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted the precarious employment and local labour market; and
- The cost of rental housing and home ownership continues to impact immediate affordability of housing options in Peel. Further, Peel has low rental vacancy rates which continue to drive high rental rates.

Despite COVID-19 and the emergency response for homeless populations, the Region is committed to help people who are currently in the shelter system to find permanent housing and as of May 15th had completed 132 long-term housing placements.

Opportunity for Partnership and Action

Given the far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Region recommends that the federal government:

- Ensure that funding through the National Housing Strategy remain flexible to help local municipalities address local needs; and

- Provide long-term, sustainable capital and operational funding for affordable housing, so that municipalities can address existing system pressures with current housing stock and new affordable rental development.

Ongoing funding from the federal and provincial governments is the only way the Region can address the affordable housing crisis in Peel and ensure a more sustainable solution following the COVID-19 pandemic. Investment in affordable housing at a local level will translate into:

- Cost savings for government and increased quality of life of residents.
- Reduction in social assistance and health care costs.
- Job creation and private investment.
- Improved tax revenues.
- Positive impacts on the health and well-being for the community and individuals.

C. Mental Health and Addictions

The prevalence of mental health and addictions challenges in Peel has continued to parallel population growth. It is estimated that one in five Peel residents (an estimated 276,000 residents) are impacted by at least one mental health illness and/or substance use disorder in any given year.

In Peel...

Only one in three Peel residents who require mental health and addictions services will receive the treatment that they need leaving an estimated 184,000 Peel residents (including just over 60,000 children and youth) without the necessary treatment and appropriate community supports. These trends reflect ongoing challenges with access and availability of necessary services to meet the demands in Peel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified and underscored system pressures for mental health and addictions supports and the urgent need to address disparities in Peel.

Current measures to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 have also created new mental health and addictions concerns related to the well-being of health care workers and other frontline line workers, and vulnerable populations with limited access to social supports. Addressing challenges with social isolation, anxiety, mental health and addictions, and other inequities is especially critical during COVID-19 to reduce further impacts to the mental health and well-being of residents in Peel.

As COVID-19 protective measures are put in place, some programs have been put on hold while waitlists continue to grow and challenges around the access and availability of mental health and addictions services continue. In response, the Region has acted quickly to collaborate with local community mental health and addictions system partners through a coordinated approach to meet the needs of Peel residents. Community partners are working to foster supportive environments, transform care pathways and mitigate risk for crisis situations by:

- Increasing opportunities for social connectedness, especially among youth e.g. through local Peel initiatives such as the Youth Empowering Students for Mental Health (YES4MH) initiative for secondary school students, Project Now to address suicide prevention, and a youth wellness hub located in Malton to co-locate related services to support youth well-being.
- Continuing to work in partnership to improve system navigation for mental health services and supports through existing system partnerships.

- Addressing needs around client-centered care pathways (particularly transitional points between youth and adult system) and ensuring timely access to mental health and addictions services.

Amidst efforts to address mental health and addictions challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Region has also expanded supports for vulnerable groups including victims of human sex trafficking. Although traumatic experiences while being trafficked may induce or exacerbate mental disorders, poor mental health may also increase vulnerability to trafficking. The rate of human trafficking incidents in Peel has grown to become among the highest in Canada and the Region is implementing a three-year pilot program to address the impacts of this troubling crime. During the COVID-19 crisis, the risks to victims is particularly high due to the current physical distancing and stay at home requirements which can impede access to available interventions or supports.

Opportunity for Partnership and Action

The Region is supportive of the federal government's commitment to mental health and addictions and supports the important role all levels of government, including the federal government, can play in investing in mental health and addictions supports that are flexible and able to address existing local needs. Dedicated supports and investments to protect vulnerable populations are especially important given the current COVID-19 environment, including supports for youth, seniors, those facing increased isolation or risk.

Working in Partnership – Community Response

The Region is focused on a community-based response to COVID-19. Peel's not-for-profit sector has demonstrated resilience by providing essential programs and services to vulnerable populations during this pandemic. Through a Community Response Table, more than 90 organization representatives, including the local municipalities in Brampton, Caledon and Mississauga, as well as a broad range of community stakeholders have come together to discuss shared challenges, emerging needs, opportunities and implementing solutions.

To better enable action and co-develop solutions for the community, the Community Response Table has further self-organized into dedicated taskforces aimed at addressing key issues including: Family Violence, Seniors, Volunteers, Systemic Discrimination and Municipal Partnership. Through the Community Response Table, community agencies have already received more than \$1 million in funding from the Region to support urgent community needs. This funding will be aligned with the medium and long-term mitigation measures designed to address the impacts of COVID-19 and is an example of innovation and partnership as the Region of Peel continues to support its most vulnerable residents to have access to high quality social services and programs.

Recommendations for a Collaborative Path Forward

As a leader in the delivery of municipal services, the Region of Peel is working hard to support residents through the COVID-19 pandemic. However, with long term impacts to revenues, rising costs, and the inability to operate in deficit, the Region, like many other communities in Canada, will face financial pressures in the coming months and years. The pressures from COVID-19 will continue to challenge our delivery of many essential services.

As the trajectory of COVID-19 evolves, the Region remains committed to caring for our seniors in congregate settings like long term care and retirement homes, providing access to services

amongst our vulnerable populations, and ensuring the sustainability of community-based programs and services.

To achieve this, the Region will require commitment from the all levels of government and ongoing funding to address existing inequities and growing pressures in our system. The Region recognizes the federal government's contributions aimed at supporting youth, seniors, students and vulnerable populations impacted the hardest by COVID-19, most notably through federal investments in supports for community-based organizations, and businesses through Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and wage subsidies, and the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA). This investment is necessary, but more must be done to ensure that communities can overcome the long-term impacts of the pandemic.

Additional early investments by the federal government will help to shape Peel's path to recovery and resilience from the impacts of COVID-19. Key investments in housing and homelessness, employment supports and financial aid to community-based organizations are essential to maintain the fabric of our communities and the well-being of Peel's residents.

Working Together

Moving forward, the Region of Peel recommends that the federal government:

- Work in coordination with municipal governments and provincial governments to invest in locally informed solutions that support the most vulnerable populations and consider regional approaches that meet unique needs. For example, Peel is a high growth, diverse community with rapidly growing infrastructure needs that require targeted investments to address Peel-specific challenges.
- Fund population health approaches that will enable municipal levels of government to manage the new normal. Immediate investments could be directed to support enhanced testing, while more sustainable funding could support public health, mental health and addictions, and long term care, where existing challenges have only been exacerbated by funding inequities for high growth communities like Peel.
- Provide funding for immediate recovery efforts and sustained support to ensure that municipalities can continue to safeguard our most vulnerable populations, including seniors and those facing precarious housing or homelessness.

The Region of Peel is committed to working with the federal government to address the short and long term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and will support the development of a comprehensive strategy to ensure that the health and well-being of Canadians, including those most vulnerable in our communities, are healthy and safe.

About the Region of Peel

The Region of Peel works with residents and partners to create a healthy, safe and connected Community for Life for approximately 1.5 million people and over 175,000 businesses in the cities of Brampton and Mississauga and the Town of Caledon.

The Region of Peel (the Region) supports the health and well-being of each and everyone of our residents every day, delivering a wide range of services to the residents and businesses in the cities of Brampton and Mississauga and the Town of Caledon. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Region has demonstrated that municipal services are playing an important role in funding and delivery of many direct and essential services. In Peel, this includes:

- Local police and ambulance services
- Maintenance of roads and essential infrastructure
- Clean water and wastewater services
- Garbage collection and recycling
- Local social services
- Early learning and childcare
- Social Assistance
- Housing for vulnerable populations
- Long term care services
- Local public health services
- Sustainability and environmental protections

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