

For Information

REPORT TITLE: **Ensuring Accessibility During COVID-19**

FROM: Kathryn Lockyer, Interim Commissioner of Corporate Services

OBJECTIVE

To provide an update on the Region of Peel's actions to ensure accessibility while responding to and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- The COVID-19 Pandemic prompted organizations to quickly adapt to new methods of service delivery.
 - Many Regional services transitioned online in response to the crisis, while continuing to ensure that essential needs of the community were met in an accessible and inclusive manner.
 - The Region of Peel moved quickly to respond to the needs of staff by ensuring that digital requirements and mental health supports were in place to assist them in carrying out their daily duties.
 - This report highlights some of the accessible initiatives undertaken by the Region in response to COVID-19.
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DISCUSSION

1. Background

On March 17, 2020, the Ontario government declared a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 18, 2020, the Region of Peel declared a state of emergency. This prompted the closure of many establishments including daycare centres, recreational programs, restaurants, churches, theatres, etc. Working from home guidelines were put in place and social gatherings were limited.

The Region of Peel needed to quickly adapt to the changing environment while responding to the crisis. This included supporting staff to work from home when possible and continuing to carry out essential services in the community such as health care, housing and social services.

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2. Responding with Accessibility in Mind

The COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted the lives of all Canadians. However, certain populations have been at increased risk of infection and of being affected by isolation measures. The measures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have had an increased impact on the overall well-being of persons with disabilities. As we respond to the pandemic and plan for recovery, we must ensure that the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities are being taken into consideration.

It is said that innovation is born out of crisis and this has not been more evident than in the Region's response during the pandemic. Some of the ways the Region adapted while ensuring that essential programs and services continued to be accessible and inclusive, include:

- **Region of Peel website.** Translation capabilities were added to the Region of Peel website which allow residents to translate web content into 10 different languages. A COVID-19 Virtual Assistant was also introduced to help users get COVID-19 information quickly, improving the service delivery experience and providing more options for members of the public to obtain information in an accessible manner.
- **Supporting staff during the transition to work remotely.** Ensuring staff had the tools and resources, including equipment, technology and meeting software, to carry out their role while working from home.
- **Mental health and wellness supports for staff.** Response to the pandemic was fast paced and continuously evolving. With this came added pressures and demands, especially for frontline and health care workers. It was critical that staff had the resources and supports to help them navigate and cope with these changes and added pressures. This included 24/7 access to the Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP). A COVID-19 online employee portal was also launched to provide staff with timely information, resources and a means to keep engaged.
- **The use of technology and meeting software.** Microsoft Teams was launched across the organization. This application provides a safe and secure option for remote meetings and includes note-taking capabilities and accessibility features such as closed captioning.
- **Remote Council meetings.** Cisco WebEx Meeting technology was leveraged to enable live and interactive virtual Council meetings. WebEx can accommodate small or large group meetings, as well as internal or external participants. WebEx was chosen over other meeting applications for its proven stability at the peak of the Pandemic and added functionality. WebEx accessibility features include:
 - Ability to enable closed captioning.
 - 'Pin' feature allows you to pin anyone's video regardless of who is speaking. This is very useful when using sign language interpreters.
 - Ability to access recordings and transcripts.
 - Ease to change layout so end user decides what is placed front and centre
 - In addition, meetings are live streamed on the Region of Peel website and include the option of viewing them on YouTube following the meeting.

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- **PAMA Online.** In an effort to keep the community engaged, PAMA released its first virtual exhibition, Morphology. It also launched PAMA@Home which offers easy, fun filled online activities and educational resources for all ages and includes specialized programs for people of all abilities.

3. Preparing for Recovery

As the Region of Peel moves into the Province's stage three of re-opening, we must ensure that our programs and services are accessible and inclusive and that we continue to look for opportunities for improvement. Areas of discussion as we move forward have included:

- Consulting with the Region's AAC regarding pedestrian flow and signage at our facility located at 10 Peel Centre Dr. to ensure safety and physical distancing. Suggestions included using a simple, clear and inclusive approach in the signage. Committee members also reiterated the importance of addressing the needs of those that may require assistance when navigating the ramp.
- The use of different types of protective equipment such as masks, face shields, plexi-glass barriers, etc., and their accessibility implications while ensuring a safe customer service experience. All staff working on site will be wearing non-surgical face masks. glass and plexiglass barriers are being installed at all client facing counters including Council Chambers, Access Peel, Human Services receptions, Clerk's counter, Public Works counters and Health Clinics.
- Mitigating health and safety protocols during visits at Long-Term Care settings. For example what are the rights of a visitor that has a disability and requires their support person with them when Provincial guidelines only allow for one visitor at a time?

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented additional challenges and barriers to the rights and well being of persons with disabilities. The Region of Peel continues to look for opportunities to address such barriers and ensure that our programs and services are accessible and inclusive to persons of all abilities. We must ensure that even in a global pandemic, accessibility continues to be embedded into key strategies and planning to create a community where everyone has a sense of belonging and achieves the Region's vision of Community for Life.

For further information regarding this report, please Juliet Jackson, Director, Culture & Inclusion, Ext. 6741, juliet.jackson@peelregion.ca.

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Reviewed and/or approved in workflow by:

Department Commissioner and Division Director.

Final approval is by the Chief Administrative Officer.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nancy Polsinelli". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "N" and a distinct dot over the "i" in "Polsinelli".

N. Polsinelli, Interim Chief Administrative Officer