

**For Information**

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**REPORT TITLE:**      **Overview of Key COVID-19 Response Activities to Mitigate Vulnerabilities and Support Accessibility**

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## **OBJECTIVE**

To provide an overview of actions to address issues concerning accessibility and the needs of vulnerable populations during the Region's COVID-19 response.

## **REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

- The consequences of COVID-19 have surpassed any previous response by the Region of Peel to a significant event or emergency.
  - To facilitate and coordinate response efforts, the Peel Public Health Emergency Operations Centre was activated on January 23, 2020, followed by the activation of the Regional Emergency Operations Centre on March 10, 2020.
  - On March 18, 2020, a Regional Declaration of Emergency was made due to consequences of COVID-19.
  - Through collaboration with internal and external stakeholders, a wide range of measures have been implemented or supported to assist vulnerable populations and those with accessibility needs.
  - The Region will continue to coordinate and support response and recovery activities for the foreseeable future, including measures to mitigate the risk to vulnerable populations and individuals with accessibility needs.
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## **DISCUSSION**

### **1. Background**

In late January 2020, Regional Emergency Management supported Peel Public Health's activation of their Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) due to the developing concerns related to COVID-19. In the following weeks, Regional Emergency Management established regular contact with various internal and external Emergency Management stakeholders, including Peel Regional Police and the local municipalities.

As the footprint of COVID-19 expanded with associated issues and concerns, so did the scope of activities undertaken by the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre and Regional Emergency Management. Where possible, guidance was prepared and distributed to stakeholders to support their organizational and operational changes. In

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consultation with Public Health, Regional Emergency Management provided information to transit operators, including accessible transit, to mitigate the risk of exposure to both clients and operators. Further guidance was provided to develop and implement service delivery changes to mitigate the risk of further COVID-19 spread.

On March 10, 2020, the Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) was activated to ensure a corporate response to address the evolving consequences of COVID-19 within the Region of Peel. On March 18, 2020, a Regional Declaration of Emergency was made and remains in effect. This marked the first time a Declaration of Emergency has been made by the Region of Peel.

Since the activation of the REOC, numerous operations, communications, planning processes and stakeholder consultations have been undertaken by REOC Command, staff, task forces and associated working groups. There has been extensive collaboration with other levels of government, local municipalities and community partners. This extensive collaboration resulted in numerous effective measures to cope with COVID-19 including a community response table to assist agencies in need and for the distribution of personal protective equipment.

Wherever possible, the actions of the REOC have worked to address the interests and concerns of all stakeholders and populations within the Region of Peel including those of vulnerable populations and persons with accessibility needs.

### **Support to Vulnerable Populations and Those with Accessibility Needs**

The initial priority of both the REOC and Public Health was to implement measures to “flatten the curve” through both Public Health guidance and REOC supported community efforts such as the Community Response Table and the Temporary Isolation and Recovery Sites. These approaches supported the Region’s vulnerable populations, and individuals with accessibility needs along with community support and advocacy partners in mitigating against further COVID-19 spread.

Five high-level approaches were taken to support in-need populations. These included:

#### **a) Collaboration with Community Stakeholders**

On March 23, 2020 the Region of Peel convened a virtual Community Response Table (CRT) to support Peel's most vulnerable residents during COVID-19. The goal of the CRT is to help local agencies support vulnerable and at-risk populations by responding to the needs emerging as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The CRT affords stakeholders an opportunity to better understand how COVID-19 has impacted vulnerable populations in the region and to collaborate on solutions.

Stakeholders at the CRT include the local municipalities, agencies and local community partners representing community health, social service organizations, not-for-profits, and Region of Peel staff. In total, over 160 organizations make up the CRT. Members initially met three times each week and now meet weekly.

The REOC has been able to support the CRT through the provision of messaging and public health guidance and in some cases, with the distribution of community donations. Several donations of non-medical personal protective equipment (PPE) received through

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the REOC's Logistics Section were distributed to CRT members and other community stakeholders.

### b) Temporary Isolation and Recovery Sites

Human Services established Isolation and Recovery Sites for homeless and shelter system clients to ensure that proper isolation and care could be provided. This approach also provided safeguards to minimize the potential spread of COVID-19 through the permanent shelter locations.

A model of care was developed and implemented with input and guidance from Peel Public Health and other healthcare organizations. Through this effort, individuals who were required to isolate, could do so with suitable supports on hand and available to them. In the few instances where an individual tested positive for COVID-19, the recovery site provided a full suite of health and social supports to help aide in their recuperation.

Currently this program remains active with the previously separate isolation and recovery locations having been consolidated into a single location. The consolidation has enabled the streamlining of operations, easing many of the logistical and resourcing challenges associated with operating several sites concurrently.

### c) COVID-19 Emergency Funding

In March 2020, the Region's Community Partnerships Division in Human Services established a COVID-19 Emergency Fund. The fund provides additional funding in response to the growing needs in Peel's not-for-profit sector due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 65 not-for-profits provided funding to date the following service sectors were supported:

Peel's Service Sector	Percentage
Food security	29%
Services for families, children and youth at-risk	17%
Health and Multiservice agencies	14%
Services for women and victims/survivors of domestic violence	12%
Services for those precariously housed and the homeless population	12%
Services for vulnerable older adults and those with physical and/or intellectual disabilities	10%
Services for Newcomers	3%
Volunteer Programming	3%

To be responsive to Peel's urgent community needs during the pandemic, 78 per cent of the COVID-19 funding supported:

- a) the immediate needs of low income and vulnerable clients including access to food, hygiene and other basics.
- b) 4-8 weeks of direct service delivery due to the economic impact faced by not-for-profits during COVID-19.

This immediate funding supported items such as, meal cards, food hampers, water, cleaning supplies, hygiene and toiletry kits, diapers and formula. As face to face frontline delivery

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shifted to online and phone supports, 22 per cent of COVID-19 funding supported information technology and operational costs for not-for-profits to adapt service delivery due to program closures and increased service demands.

### **d) Peel Housing Corporation Supports**

Peel Housing Corporation's (PHC) tenant population is comprised of almost 25 per cent seniors. With 28 seniors buildings located across Peel, health and safety considerations were a top priority for these vulnerable residents. Programming in common rooms delivered by community partners was put on hold to minimize risk of exposure to COVID-19. As a result, many of tenants lost an important social aspect of their regular lives. To mitigate this, PHC has developed programs and enhanced communication to offer new connections during the pandemic.

Regular communications were developed to provide information and assistance to those in need. Tenant newsletters were created, which included a seniors resource specific section, as well as regular updates on PHC operations and stories from the tenant community. In the early days of the pandemic, a senior call out strategy was deployed, with staff calling all seniors living in PHC buildings, offering a general wellness check and connections to supports and services within the community. If a tenant indicated concern regarding access to essential supplies or otherwise indicated a lack of any social connect, they were added to a call back list so that PHC staff could check back up on them. For ongoing connection, PHC partnered with Volunteer Services in Health Services, for the Seniors Connect Volunteer Telephone program that provides a free weekly phone call with a friendly volunteer to share in the warmth and connection of conversation. In addition, an onsite volunteer-run Ambassador Program has been developed at three senior sites, which offer physically distanced in person connection and information on services such as food, prescription delivery and online programming. The program has also provided information about topics relevant to seniors such as falls prevention, mental health and wellbeing, healthy eating and fire safety. PHC also reopened community gardens and cooling centres during the summer with enhanced safety measures which followed Public Health guidelines.

As Peel Region is facing another rise in COVID-19 cases and communities are facing more restrictive measures, PHC is planning a second wellness check initiative for our seniors population to ensure that they continue to do well and to update them on any new available supports and programs. PHC will continue to explore partnerships and opportunities to enhance connections for seniors as the pandemic continues.

### **e) Coordinated Marketing and Communication Approaches**

With any emergency event, effective communications have always been a fundamental requirement throughout the full duration of the event. Given the scope and scale of the COVID-19 response, the need for coordinated messaging by all stakeholders was quickly identified and has been a significant operational undertaking of the REOC.

The Region of Peel online Virtual Assistant allows residents and members of the community to ask questions and access automated assistance to locate up-to-date information. The application updates information based on trends with respect to information that is most frequently requested by the community.

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Wherever possible, messaging and materials have been prepared and developed to account for the needs of many diverse groups. High-contrast infographics, translated content and concise language are a few of the many considerations that designers consider when developing COVID-19 information materials.

A Communications and Marketing Task Force, comprised of Region of Peel, local municipal, public health and health sectors, and when needed, first responder stakeholders, meets regularly to address any critical messaging issues and coordinate communications efforts to the extent possible. This Task Force continually assesses the effectiveness of any communications efforts and implements new approaches when necessary.

### **f) Peel Public Health's COVID-19 Response**

As part of Peel Public Health's case, contact, exposure and outbreak management, accessible services to individuals is done on a case-by-case basis according to the individual's needs. If accessible services are required, the case and contact management team reach out to partners to problem solve based on the individual's needs. Examples of what the case and contact management team has done in the past include advocating for continued services in the home while isolating, providing direction on what personal protective equipment service providers should wear, accessing food deliveries, alternate methods of testing (in home) or working with TransHelp to ensure transportation options with appropriate precautions.

Peel Public Health also provides advice for infection prevention and control and manages outbreaks in congregate living situations including long-term care homes, retirement homes, group homes and shelters. Peel Public Health works with onsite staff to ensure that vulnerable residents are protected; testing for COVID-19 is available on site when needed; appropriate precautions are taken to reduce transmission of the virus; and the homes are able to screen and respond to any potential cases of infection.

Peel Public Health works with regional partners, Ontario Health and hospital managed assessment centres to plan community testing, including initiatives to serve vulnerable populations.

In addition to the COVID-19 response, Peel Public Health maintains critical public health programs and services at reduced capacity. This includes critical services such as management of urgent reportable diseases (e.g. Tuberculosis and Hepatitis B and C), harm reduction, and telephone-based infant feeding supports. The available critical programs are maintaining regular processes to support accessible services to those clients who require it (e.g. accessible format of print and web information, translation services).

## **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. Wherever possible, efforts to address issues related to accessibility and vulnerable populations have, and continue to be, factored into the Regional and Public Health response.

## **Overview of Key COVID-19 Response Activities to Mitigate Vulnerabilities and Support Accessibility**

Overall lessons learned from the COVID-19 response will be prepared at a later date and will include both successes and areas of improvement for supporting vulnerable populations and individuals with accessibility needs during significant events or emergencies.

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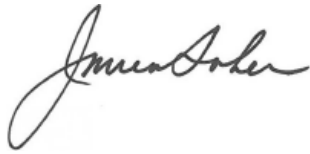
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### ***Reviewed and/or approved in workflow by:***

Department Commissioners, Division Directors and Medical Officer of Health.

Final approval is by the Chief Administrative Officer.



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J. Baker, Chief Administrative Officer