

Public health system evaluation and lessons from the first peak of COVID-19

A report on behalf of the Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health | August 2020

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Local public health units have spent months leading the response to the COVID-19 pandemic across sectors in their communities

Findings from this evaluation can be used to protect Ontario's communities by:

- Building on public health system response that should continue or be enhanced during resurgence and future peaks
- Informing health system planning and preparedness for resurgence of COVID-19 and the upcoming influenza season
- Leveraging the strengths of the local public health system connections with community to ensure cross sector interventions

METHODS

- All Medical Officers of Health were invited to participate in the evaluation via email
- Further input received from all COMOH membership at two meetings

Key questions:

- What worked well during the first peak?
- What could be improved?
- What should continue or be enhanced?
- What else should we consider for future COVID-19 planning and influenza in the coming months?

- 17/34 (50%) local public health units participated (60% rural, 40% urban), sharing insights on >100 local initiatives
- Evaluations and continuous quality improvement processes carried out by local public health units through reviews, surveys, and interviews with their teams, the public, community partners, and stakeholders across sectors were incorporated into this report

SUSTAINING THE PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE

Local public health leadership has been critical to protecting health and tailoring responses to meet the needs of our communities during the first peak

SIX THEMES IDENTIFIED



- Public health measures prevented illnesses and deaths that would have overwhelmed our health care system and remain a threat as seen in other jurisdictions
- Public health leadership brought communities together to flatten the epidemic curve using preventive measures that continue to be a mainstay of the response
- Experience and technical training in public health emergencies and health protection prepared local public health to respond and built on existing pandemic preparedness plans
- The most effective system in a public health emergency relies on independent local public health authorities that can leverage strong partnerships and community knowledge to adapt direction coordinated at the provincial level
- Public health holds a unique, established, and trusted position that allows collaboration with municipalities, schools, childcare settings, businesses, social services including congregate settings, health care and institutions, media, and community organizations to effectively shape local response
- Provincial and regional coordination is critical to supporting the strong leadership and response undertaken by local public health units and boards of health
- Pandemic response required rapid mobilization and scaling up of a skilled public health workforce that will need ongoing investment to respond to resurgence and increasing complexity of case management and contact tracing
- Public health innovation and adoption of new digital solutions to improve effectiveness and efficiency have been vital to enhancing widespread detection and containment efforts

OPPORTUNITIES

Local public health must provide ongoing leadership and guidance in all essential public health functions

- Local public health must build on partnerships and collaboration across sectors to address new and complex community challenges such as return to school, increased demand for health services, increase in visitors to long term care homes, re-opening of businesses, and larger social gatherings
- There must be investment in local public health workforce to allow for surge capacity needed for increasing complexity of pandemic response and maintaining critical core public health services
- There must be increased resources for IPAC and outbreak management in higher-risk settings and priority populations to minimize severe illness that would strain the health care system
- Local public health expertise and connections with community must be capitalized on at regional and provincial tables
- Roles of key health system players must be clarified and mutually respected for maximum health gains
- New technologies must be developed and adapted to support case management, contact tracing, and outbreak investigations so local public health units can enhance effectiveness despite growing complexity
- Innovative technologies must be explored to help with advanced planning, forecasting, and operational response in dealing with resurgence and other respiratory illnesses

“ Thank you for the long hours and tireless work to try to get us through the pandemic. I know we have smart and innovative people who work for us to come up with solutions for us to live during this pandemic. We can get through this together. ”

- Community partner feedback