

COVID-19 pandemic one year later

By Nate Smelle

Thursday, March 11 marked exactly one year since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Since then, more than 120,100,000 people worldwide have contracted the virus; while some 2,657,629 (March 15, 2021) have lost their lives to the virus. As of press time on Monday, in Canada, 22,482 of the 916,315 Canadians diagnosed with COVID-19 have died.

As the province with the highest number of confirmed cases (324,205, March 15, 2021), Ontario has contributed more than 7,153 names to the national death toll. Locally, in Hastings and Prince Edward counties there have been 439 confirmed cases and six deaths.

Premier Doug Ford acknowledged the one year anniversary of COVID-19 in a statement on March 11, describing the day as "the start of one of the grimmest chapters in modern health history." Noting how over the past year the vast majority of Ontarians have followed public health restrictions to stop the spread, he said the government recognizes the "extraordinary burden" these measures have placed on individuals, families and businesses across Ontario.

Ford also highlighted how the uncertainty created by the pandemic has had a devastating impact on people's mental health. With four vaccines now approved in Canada, he said he is hopeful that this could be a sign of the beginning of the end of COVID-19.

"Ontario has tragically lost more than 7,000 lives to this deadly virus," said Ford.

"We offer our deepest condolences to the families, friends, colleagues, and all of those impacted by these tragic losses of life."

Ford stated that the provincial government's overall goal is to vaccinate up to nine million Ontarians between April 2021 and July 2021. Although the government is making progress, he said the new variants of COVID-19 pose a serious risk.

"Until vaccines are widely administered, everyone needs to follow the public health advice and measures to protect themselves and their loved ones. Please do not let your guard down. I know the past year has been extremely difficult, but the people of Ontario are resilient and I am confident will get through this crisis together," added Ford.

Residents living in Ontario's long-term care homes have been among the hardest hit segments of the population nationwide. According to a report by Public Health Ontario released on March 13, COVID-19 has taken the lives of 3,878 of the 14,972 long-term care home residents who have been infected with the coronavirus.

Leader of the Official Opposition and the Ontario New Democratic Party Andrea Horwath held a roundtable with people whose lives have been deeply impacted by the pandemic to mark the one year anniversary of the pandemic. Reflecting on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Ontarians, she said her heart is with the thousands of families who lost loved ones, and who have been unable to come together to grieve and heal. Expressing her gratitude for the workers providing essential services throughout the pandemic, Horwath said "I'm really feeling for everyone who is burnt out and isolated after a long, lonely year. The pandemic has taken so much from so many, and demanded so much of us. Seniors in long-term care homes and their families have been through hell. Parents and educators are still doing a superhuman juggling act with remote learning. And small business owners continue to fight tooth and nail to stay afloat."

To reduce the spread of the pandemic, Horwath called on the Ford government to pass legislation that ensures "smaller safer classes" for teachers and students; and, that provides all workers in Ontario with paid sick days. She is also calling for "a faster, more organized vaccine rollout" by the government.

Hastings Prince Edward Public Health is currently offering COVID-19 vaccinations to eligible groups. At this stage of the rollout,

the health unit is prioritizing individuals at greatest risk from COVID-19. Starting on Monday, March 15, Ontario's booking system started to accept bookings for individuals aged 80 and older. The provincial system will provide the capacity needed to accept bookings from a large volume of individuals at once.

To deliver the vaccine to priority groups, the health unit is working in partnership with Quinte Health Care, and other health-care partners. Health-care workers deemed "highest/very high priority" are encouraged to book through their employer/workplace; or to book their appointment directly on the QHC vaccination booking page.

In light of a recent announcement from the province, HPEPH is to begin reaching out to Phase-2 priority groups beginning in April. Public Health advises the following groups of people to register to receive notification from HPEPH when they become eligible: individuals who are 60 to 79 years of age; Indigenous people; and, individuals with certain health conditions, regardless of age (see list of conditions in attached backgrounder).

For more information about the COVID-19 vaccine, including groups that are currently eligible locally, please visit hpePublicHealth.ca/covid-19-vaccines/