

Four new cases of COVID-19 reported in Bancroft area

By Nate Smelle

Initially documented in South Africa and Botswana, the potentially more transmissible Omicron COVID-19 variant has now appeared in more than 70 nations worldwide. Globally, the death list as of Dec. 14 contained 5,316,809 names. In Canada, 29,999 people have lost their lives to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic; while Ontario's death toll currently stands at 10,084.

Since the arrival of the new Omicron variant of COVID-19 in Ontario on Nov. 28 the daily case count has also been on the rise. By the time this edition of Bancroft This Week went to press on the afternoon of Dec. 14, Ontario marked its seventh consecutive day reporting 1,000+ new cases of COVID-19a; with the province adding another 1,429 new cases, and five deaths to the running tally that morning.

While the extent of the Omicron variant's impact locally remains unknown, Ontario's Science Advisory Table on COVID-19 estimate that approximately 30 of new daily infections are attributed to the Omicron variant. At this rate, experts also announced that they expect the daily case count to double every three days.

Following suit, the tallies in Hastings and Prince Edward counties have also increased sharply over the past week. On the morning of Monday, Dec. 13 the Hastings and Prince Edward Public Health confirmed another 93 new cases reported over the weekend ? four of which that remain active in the Bancroft area. The next morning the health unit announced that in the region there are currently: 231 active cases (including 26 new cases); 29 outbreaks; 10 hospitalizations; and, six people battling the virus in local Intensive Care Units. In addition, HPEPH indicated that between the two counties there has been a total of 2,064 cases, and 16 people who have died as a result of contracting COVID-19.

In response to the upward trending numbers, the government of Ontario announced last week that it would be implementing a series of new measures to protect public health. First, the province has decided to delay the lifting of proof of vaccination requirements until sometime after Jan. 17, 2022 when they had said they would begin to ease restrictions. Effective Jan. 4, 2022 Ontarians will also be required to use enhanced vaccine certificate with QR code, and the Verify Ontario app in settings where proof of vaccination is mandatory. According to the government's website, the QR code can be used digitally or by printing a paper copy of the document, which can be found online at: <https://covid19.ontariohealth.ca/> Individuals can also visit their local library or can call the Provincial Vaccine Contact Centre at 1-833-943-3900 to have their vaccine certificate mailed to them; or, visit a Service Ontario Centre to receive a printed copy.

Starting on Dec. 13, the provincial government also made it possible for approximately 5.5 million Ontarians aged 50 to receive a third dose (booster shot). However, in order to book an appointment for a booster shot, six months must have passed since the individual's second dose. Also coming into effect on Jan. 4, 2022 at 8 a.m., individuals aged 18 and over will become eligible to schedule their booster dose appointment through the province's same vaccination portal; or, by calling the same number. Booster appointments will only be booked 168 days after a second dose.

In order to protect Ontario's most vulnerable populations, the province has also increased rapid antigen testing for high-risk congregate settings to include all staff, essential caregivers, and visitors to LTC homes, regardless of vaccination status, who have travelled to any country outside of Canada (including the US) prior to entering a home. The government has also decided to strengthen rapid antigen testing for schools, effective on the return to school in January.