

Province returns to targeted approach in fight against COVID-19

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By Nate Smelle

In response to a decreasing number of cases of COVID-19, the provincial government announced on Monday afternoon that it was returning to a regional approach in fighting the pandemic.

While the majority of public health regions in Ontario (28) will remain under the Stay-at-Home order until at least Feb. 16, three regions - Hastings and Prince Edward; Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox and Addington; and, Renfrew County and District - will be moving back to the framework at the "Green-Prevent level" on Wednesday, Feb. 10.

Under the Green-Prevent level of restrictions, restaurants and non-essential businesses in the Bancroft area and throughout Hastings and Prince Edward counties are allowed to reopen, but patrons must maintain two-metres of physical distance with others, and wear face-coverings in all public spaces.

The worst impacted public health regions - Toronto, Peel and York - will remain under the Stay-at-Home order until at least Monday, Feb. 22. At that time, the province will review the trends in public health indicators and make a final decision as to whether the Stay-at-Home order can be lifted in these regions.

"Our number one priority will always be protecting the health and safety of all individuals, families and workers across the province," said Premier Doug Ford.

"But we must also consider the severe impact COVID-19 is having on our businesses. That's why we have been listening to business owners, and we are strengthening and adjusting the framework to allow more businesses to safely reopen and get people back to work."

Because of the risk posed by new variants to the province's pandemic response, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health Christine Elliott said they are introducing what they are calling an "emergency brake." This mechanism will allow the provincial government to take immediate action if there is a rapid acceleration in COVID-19 transmission in a specific public health unit region; or if a region's health care system is at risk of becoming overwhelmed. If this occurs, she said the chief medical officer of health, in consultation with the local medical officer of health, may move a region into the "Grey-Lockdown level" of restriction.

"While we have seen some progress in our fight against COVID-19, the situation in our hospitals remains precarious and the new variants pose a considerable threat to all of us," said Elliott. "As we cautiously and gradually transition out of the province-wide shutdown, we have developed an emergency brake system giving us the flexibility to contain community spread quickly in a specific region, providing an extra layer of protection."

Following the announcement, leader of the official opposition and the Ontario New Democratic Party, Andrea Horwath expressed her concerns regarding the Ford government's decision to begin the re-opening. By reopening the province too quickly, without taking additional steps to make the reopening safe, she believes the Premier could be "dooming Ontario to repeat the cycle of sickness and lockdowns."

Rather than rushing the reopening, Horwath said a wiser approach would be to invest in public health measures that "stop the spread" so that "we're opening up for good this time." The second wave didn't need to be so devastating, she said if Premier Ford would have been more cautious with the provincial reopening after the first wave.

"We're all paying the price because Doug Ford keeps making the same mistakes," said Horwath. "He didn't want to invest in

long-term care, so the second wave claimed more lives than the first. He didn't invest in more testing, tracing and public health protections, so businesses have opened only to be forced to shut down again. He didn't invest in safer schools, so they reopened only to have to close again. He keeps refusing to give people paid sick days, only for experts to reveal again and again that workplaces are driving the spread.?