

Peel cracks down on workplaces as COVID cases soar, recommends paid sick days

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As COVID continues to hit the Peel Region hard, Peel Public Health has issued an updated Section 22 Order on workplaces that will direct businesses with five or more cases of COVID-19 in the previous 14 days to close for 10 days where the cases could have reasonably acquired their infection at work or no obvious source of infection has been identified outside of the workplace.

The amendment will go into effect Friday, April 23.

The updated provision of the Section 22 Order will be in effect whenever Peel is in the shutdown or Grey-Lockdown zones of the provincial framework.

Businesses essential to the well-being of the community will be exempt from full closure. This includes healthcare, first responders, critical infrastructure, emergency childcare, education, and others.

The complete list is being developed and will be included in the Order.

All affected employees must self-isolate. Employees who are isolating are not permitted to work in any other workplace. Peel Public Health strongly recommends that employers directed to close under this Order provide paid leave for impacted employees.

Peel Region Medical Officer of Health Dr. Lawrence Loh made the decision to update the Section 22 order to help slow the spread with variants becoming an increasing issue in the region.

Workplaces that remain open continue to be a major driver of COVID-19 cases in Peel, as they have been throughout the course of our emergency response, Loh said. With variant spread we are also seeing transmission occur more quickly and widely. At this critical juncture in our pandemic response, the updated provisions in this Section 22 Order are necessary to quickly stop variant transmission in workplaces, support rapid workplace investigations, and protect our essential workers and our community.

In the absence of legislated paid sick days, we also call on all employers impacted by expedited closure to provide paid leave for all employees impacted by COVID-19 or these new safety measures, and to consider moving as many operations as possible virtually to reduce risk.

At the Caledon Town Council meeting on Tuesday, April 20, Loh provided an update on the ongoing COVID-19 situation in the region.

We are seeing a significant resurgence with the third wave of COVID-19 across all three municipalities in the Region of Peel, including Caledon, said Loh. The latest numbers for Caledon, a test positivity of 13.3 per cent and an incidence rate of 362 cases per 100,000 population these are the highest numbers we've seen in Caledon, as well as throughout the Region of Peel since the pandemic began. The numbers and trends at this point in time do not seem to be resolving.

We are also quite aware of significant stress and strain on our hospital system. As of today, William Osler has over 200 COVID-positive patients that have been admitted and their ICU is in the upper digits of capacity. Patient transfers are occurring as far as Windsor, Ontario at this time which is a really quite significant situation and an unprecedented situation at William Osler.

We're also drawing in Health Human Resources to assist with the effort from across Ontario, it's a very significant situation that we're facing at this time.?

With the severity of workplace outbreaks playing a major factor in Peel Region's dire numbers, Loh explained the reasoning behind the update to the Section 22 Order and the additional measures that have been taken by both the provincial government and Peel Public Health.

?The provincial government has instituted a number of measures and we have coordinated stricter measures in respect of workplace outbreaks,? he said. ?We do know workplace outbreaks are moving faster and further upon introductions into workplaces which is really limiting our ability for our investigations to effectively control spread in those settings. In the course of that closure, we will publicize which workplaces have been closed under these provisions and it's our strong recommendations employees impacted by these closures will be paid by their employers.

?This is a significant measure and a lot of people have asked why is it coming now? We have had significant workplace outbreaks throughout the Region of Peel and our investigations have previously been able to keep up; however, at the height of this third wave we're seeing so many workplace outbreaks that by the time we are actually able to get into workplaces and determine if there is a connection between the cases and the clusters that have been identified, it's already quite late and we already have significant numbers of workers that have been sickened because of how quickly this variant has spread in these settings. It's similar to schools, where something is detected, we'd dismiss the cohort and send people home so they can be safe?that's essentially the parallel that we're drawing with workplaces.?

After last week's update from Premier Doug Ford and the provincial government, including a province-wide extension to school closures, Loh remains hopeful the situation will begin trending in the right direction if everyone stays diligent and vaccines continue to come in.

?The learning at home for the school system will continue indefinitely,? he said. ?I think those taken together with the stricter measures on workplaces and schools, and also, everyone else who has the ability to stay at home is going to help get us through this third wave. I'm also excited because our vaccination efforts have really hit a stride. Across the Region of Peel, we're now delivering nearly 100,000 doses a week and 400,000 doses a month. We have already passed the threshold of 400,000 doses delivered in the Region of Peel since our campaign began. If we keep pace with where things are at, we will likely exceed the Premier's plan to vaccinate 40 per cent of our community by May 5 (first dose) and 40 per cent of our 60-plus population is already vaccinated (first dose).

?We are hopeful we'll continue to move quickly through the age groups and continue to vaccinate the priority populations. While it won't be happening fast enough to get us out of this third wave, it will hopefully stop a fourth and reduce hospitalizations and mortality to a point that we can maybe start to gradually exit measures with confidence in the way that other countries went.?

Between the increased school and workplaces measures, continued precautions with masks and distancing, and consistent vaccinations in the Region of Peel, Loh believes the third wave can be flattened.

?This is sort of the dark before the dawn,? he said. ?We just really need to try and reduce our contact and interactions to bring this third wave under control. It needs to flatten out again and I'm hopeful that the measures that have been taken with schools, closures, and an enhanced workplace response will help us in the next few weeks to do so and our vaccine coverage rates will continue to eventually move us into a modification with the patterns of transmission we're seeing in our community, and hopefully a confident and gradual exit from the pandemic.?

For more information on COVID-19 vaccine eligibility and to book a vaccine visit www-origin.peelregion.ca/coronavirus/vaccine.