

Public health staff seeing increase in calls for service

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The Region of Peel's Public Health Team is seeing an increase in calls for service and facing difficulties in meeting mandatory inspection requirements.

To meet this challenge, Peel Public Health Staff will be requesting additional resources through the Region's 2025 budget, as outlined in a staff report presented to Region of Peel Council for information today (November 7).

The report, presented by Peel's Commissioner of Health Services Nancy Polsinelli and acting Medical Officer of Health Gayane Hovhannisyan, states there's been a significant increase in the volume and complexity of inspections required due to growth in Peel.

In 2023, Peel Public Health conducted over 18,000 compliance, pre-operational, complaint-based and follow-up inspections at various locations in Peel.

These inspections resulted in 299 passes and 32 closures of food premises, 29 conditional passes and five closures in personal service settings, and 76 recreational water closures.

Peel Public Health Staff are responsible for responding to food and water safety issues, tobacco and vaping complaints, potential rabies exposures, and environmental issues like blue green algae that impacts recreational waters.

Issues such as inspections in home-based food businesses are complicated and public health is seeing a rise in complaints along with outbreaks, reads the report. Increased resources are needed to protect the community, complete mandated inspections and provide timely responses to health hazards. The 2025 Budget will include requests for additional resources.

Home-based food businesses provide unique public health challenges as they often prepare high-risk food items in domestic kitchens not designed for commercial use.

Bringing domestic kitchens into compliance with the regulation takes additional staffing resources and increases inspection pressures, reads the report. ...many are operating under the radar because they don't comply with municipal zoning provisions.

There are a number of factors contributing to the increase in demand for the services of Peel's public health inspectors, such as high staff and owner turnover in the food service industry. The number of food premises, child care settings, personal service settings and recreational water facilities have all increased in recent years.

Peel has one of the lowest provincial per capita funding rates among public health units in Ontario. Provincial funding has not kept pace with Peel's population growth or inflationary costs, thereby limiting Public Health's ability to meet current and future demands, reads the report. Additional staff were approved in the 2023 budget for 2024. These staff have been deployed to alleviate workload pressures for staff and to ensure timely responses.

The report states that while public health inspections are mandated by the Province, the increase in the workload for Peel staff has not been matched by an increase in funding to hire new staff.

Without a parallel increase in Provincial funding, the increase in inspection pressures creates potential risks such as increased risk of foodborne illness and outbreaks, reads the report.