

Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan Update

Date: November 22, 2021

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health; Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan is a key part of the City's COVID-19 Vaccination Program. It leverages community expertise and partnerships through Vaccine Engagement Teams to facilitate and promote equitable vaccine uptake across Toronto. Overall, the preliminary evaluation found that Vaccine Engagement Teams have been an effective strategy for increasing vaccine confidence, access, and uptake among diverse communities across Toronto, having engaged over 800,000 community members since April 2021.

Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration have identified a continued need for equity-focused outreach to continue. Prioritizing of populations most impacted by COVID-19 and with lowest vaccine uptake is necessary to meet the City and the Province's 90 percent vaccine target, and to address the developing challenges associated with vaccine certification, immunization of children under the age of 12 and provision of third and booster doses to those who are eligible. Accordingly, the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan will be extended for an additional six months, from January 1 to July 1, 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health and the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, recommend that:

1. The Board of Health receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The Ministry of Health has indicated that eligible extraordinary costs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that are over and above the provincial grant will be reimbursed.

There is no financial impact associated with the adoption of the recommendation in this report beyond what has already been submitted in the Board of Health Recommended Toronto Public Health 2022 Operating Budget Submission.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

COVID-19 has exacerbated long-standing systemic health inequities. Individuals and families living in low-income, densely populated communities, persons with disabilities, newcomers, racialized communities, and Indigenous and Black Torontonians continue to be disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unequal experiences of the social determinants of health have created the conditions for COVID-19 to differently impact these communities. They experience higher rates of COVID-19 positivity and hospitalization, and lower vaccination rates.

Over the course of the pandemic, equity-deserving populations have also experienced higher levels of emotional trauma and mental health challenges as a result of higher rates of COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death. These population groups have also experienced job loss, financial insecurity, and higher stress levels as essential workers with greater COVID-19 risk exposure. This is further intensified by existing barriers such as housing precarity, food insecurity, and social isolation.

DECISION HISTORY

On October 25, 2021, the Board of Health Requested the Medical Officer of Health to work with the Province of Ontario and the City Manager on funding, adapting and extending the work of Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan to support the continued rollout of the COVID-19 Vaccine Engagement Teams campaign, and to report back to the December 6, 2021 meeting of the Board of Health.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.HL31.1>

On December 16, 2020, City Council requested funding from the provincial government to support the community engagement plan being prepared by Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration to support community groups and other stakeholders to build knowledge and support for the COVID-19 immunization plan.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL24.2>

COMMENTS

An Equity-Driven Model for Vaccine Engagement

The Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan enhances measures to support equity-deserving groups disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Social Development, Finance and Administration has been leading the coordination of this Plan in partnership with Toronto Public Health, as well as Shelter, Support and Housing and Administration, Strategic Communications, and other City divisions. The plan includes both a place-based approach to support residents in all 140 neighbourhoods of the city and a population-specific approach to reach communities hardest hit by the pandemic.

Vaccine Engagement Teams operate through 14 geographic and population-based consortiums made up of over 155 health, community, and faith-based organizations. The consortiums use a variety of agile, place-based and population-specific approaches to increase vaccine confidence and access, and prioritize equity-based engagement and mobilization. Indigenous organizations were given funds to self-determine culturally-appropriate strategies for engagement among Indigenous communities.

Since April 2021, Vaccine Engagement Teams have engaged over 800,000 community members, including older adults who are isolated, people experiencing homelessness, people living with disabilities and mental health trauma, newcomer populations, and Indigenous, Black, South Asian and other racialized communities that have historically experienced systemic oppression and exploitation from government and medical institutions.

Community Ambassadors Mobilized

The Vaccine Engagement Teams have mobilized over 350 Community Ambassadors across Toronto. These trained community members act as trusted peers, key points of contact in the neighbourhoods where they live and/or work to build vaccine confidence, provide access to vaccine resources, and amplify public health messaging across their networks.

Ambassadors reflect the diversity in culture, race and language of Toronto's equity-deserving groups, and facilitate extensive and targeted outreach to individuals and communities that align with their age, cultural/racial identity, and languages spoken. Ambassador outreach focuses on individuals and communities most negatively impacted by COVID-19, and most hesitant to get vaccinated.

Ambassadors are also provided with ongoing training and information on COVID-19 vaccines, common vaccine concerns, and vaccine confidence-building strategies from Toronto Public Health, behavioural scientists, and community organizations.

Between July and September 2021, Ambassadors spent over 25,000 hours conducting outreach and engaged over 567,000 people using a wide range of engagement activities, including:

- 1,675 engagements that supported individuals in navigating the COVID-19 vaccine registration system and finding a vaccine clinic in their neighbourhood;
- 900 public setting engagement sessions in parks, lobbies, or shopping centres;
- 600 direct phone engagement sessions, often cold-calling or through a phone bank;
- 500 door-to-door outreach shifts in both market and social housing communities;
- 425 sessions of online social media engagement such as education campaigns or group-based virtual events; and
- 175 engagement sessions with people experiencing homelessness.

Ambassadors also supported vaccine access and related services during this period, including:

- 15,000 pre-filled Presto cards and 4,700 ridesharing vouchers for those facing transportation barriers accessing to vaccine clinics;
- 600 referrals to local community or health services;
- 550 referrals to COVID-19 testing sites; and
- 200 local vaccine clinics with on-site registration and coordination support.

Monitoring and Evaluating Impact to Improve Ongoing Service Delivery

Regular reports from Vaccine Engagement Teams have facilitated a better understanding of trends and emerging issues related to vaccine confidence in Toronto. This intelligence is used to develop responsive strategies to address identified issues, such as culturally responsive education campaigns, mobile clinics, and translated materials in diverse languages.

Social Development, Finance and Administration and Toronto Public Health, and an evaluation partner, Taylor Newberry Consulting, are leading an evaluation of the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan to assess the extent to which they have enhanced vaccine confidence and access for equity-deserving groups in Toronto. To date, a preliminary evaluation of the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan, has been completed. This preliminary evaluation assessed the extent to which the project's outcomes have been achieved and the facilitators and barriers to achieving these outcomes. The evaluation utilized qualitative and quantitative data gathered between July and October 2021 from resident ambassadors, consortium coordinators, and community agency staff. The report identified recommendations and lessons to inform solutions to vaccine equity barriers.

Preliminary Evaluation Findings

The findings indicate that many ambassadors, consortium coordinators, and community agencies see the Vaccine Engagement Teams model as a critical and effective component of the City of Toronto's COVID-19 response. Overall, the evaluation found

that Vaccine Engagement Teams have been an effective strategy for increasing vaccine confidence, access, and uptake among diverse communities across Toronto. The evaluation indicates that the Vaccine Engagement Team success is created by strong consortium governance structures, information and resource-sharing by consortium agencies and Ambassadors, and support from the City of Toronto and community agencies. The findings also identify Vaccine Engagement Teams as an effective model for place-based strategic planning, engagement, collaboration, and a vehicle for effective community member training and employment skill development.

The evaluation identified the following key themes:

- **An Innovative and Effective Model for Place-Based Community and Health Programming:** The evaluation data demonstrates that the model is effective at place-based vaccine engagement, strategic planning and implementation. The governance structure and communication practices of the Vaccine Engagement Teams are effective, and the model increased connection and collaboration across agencies and between community members and agencies.
- **Effective Ambassador Training, Outreach and Engagement Methods:** The evaluation findings show that engagement strategies have meaningfully connected community members, and resulted in greater vaccine awareness, confidence and access. Virtual and in-person engagement methods included local outreach, targeted peer-to-peer engagement, personalised outreach and follow-up, and language-specific communication tactics that personalize the vaccination experience. The training provided to Ambassadors was effective and useful in increasing ambassador knowledge and engagement skills.
- **Increased Vaccine Confidence, Access and Equity:** The evaluation data indicates that Vaccine Engagement Teams have effectively increased vaccine confidence, access and uptake in their communities by using culturally-responsive outreach and tailored community education strategies. Additionally, the model has been responsive to emerging barriers that impeded vaccine confidence as reported by the community.
- **Mixed Receptivity to Vaccine Engagement:** The evaluation data indicates that the work of Vaccine Engagement Teams and ambassadors are valued and well received by the majority of residents. However, Vaccine Engagement Teams and ambassadors also reported that they occasionally encountered indifference and even hostility in response to their efforts. This reflects the wide range of audiences engaged and the continued need to address vaccine hesitancy and misinformation, and to ensure that responsive ambassador training and supports are maintained.

The intelligence gathered from the Preliminary Evaluation is being used to inform program improvements. This information will also provide a baseline for the initiative's final evaluation, planned for completion in spring 2022. The final evaluation will assess the consortium-led delivery model and the skill development of community Ambassadors. Findings will identify lessons learned, enable continuous improvements

for future service delivery, and recommend solutions to address systemic issues and barriers to health equity.

Extending the Work of the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan

Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration have identified an ongoing need for equity-focused outreach to continue. A prioritizing of populations most impacted by COVID-19 and with lowest vaccine uptake is necessary to meet the City and the Province's 90 percent vaccine target, and to address the developing challenges associated with vaccine certification, immunization of children under the age of 12 and provision of third and booster doses to those who are eligible.

Given the promising results demonstrated in the Preliminary Evaluation and the ongoing need for equity-focused outreach to continue, the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan will continue to operate until July 1, 2022. In addition to enabling vaccine outreach, other applications of the model are being explored to help the coordination of public health, health care and social services.

The City has made funds available for this purpose and will be seeking reimbursement from the Province for these extraordinary costs incurred in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONTACT

Aina-Nia Grant, Director, Community Resources, Social Development, Finance and Administration, 416-392-8608, Aina-Nia.Grant@toronto.ca

Dr. Na-Koshie Lamptey, Deputy Medical Officer of Health, Toronto Public Health, 416-338-8402, Na-Koshie.Lamptey@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Dr. Eileen de Villa
Medical Officer of Health

Denise Andrea Campbell
Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration