

TO Supports: COVID-19 Equity Action Plan Update

Date: March 28, 2022

To: Board of Health

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

Wards: All

SUMMARY

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Toronto Public Health and the City of Toronto have been committed to identifying and mitigate inequities in health outcomes for Torontonians. In December 2020, the Board of Health endorsed the TO Supports: COVID-19 Equity Action Plan with 25 targeted equity actions.

This report responds to the Board of Health's request on March 21, 2022 for an update on TO Supports: Equity Action Plan, including Vaccine Engagement Teams. Overall, TO Supports has demonstrated innovation, effectiveness, responsiveness and impact in providing assistance, outreach, and resources for equity-deserving Torontonians throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

A post-pandemic recovery must respond to the compounded effects on the health and well-being of equity-deserving populations and remain adaptable to potential changes in public health needs driven by future variants, vaccine changes or increased disease severity. Successful equity-focused engagement models that have been employed effectively as part of the pandemic response are being explored to support a more equitable pandemic recovery, and longer-term engagement model for public health, health care, and social services.

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

There is no financial impact associated with the adoption of the recommendation in this report beyond what has already been approved in the prior years' Operating Budgets for Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance & Administration.

Funding for ongoing programming is included in the 2022 approved Operating Budgets for Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance & Administration.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

COVID-19 has exacerbated long-standing systemic social and health inequities related to poverty, racism, other forms of discrimination, and access to supports and services. 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 experienced higher levels of emotional trauma and mental health challenges. 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 pre-existing barriers such as housing precarity, food insecurity, and social isolation.

DECISION HISTORY

On March 21, 2022, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, report to the Board's meeting on April 11, 2022, with an update and presentation on TO Supports, including Vaccine Engagement Teams.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2022.HL35.6>

On December 6, 2021, the Board of Health approved an extension of the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan until July 1, 2022 to facilitate and promote equitable vaccine uptake across Toronto. Preliminary findings of the external Vaccine Engagement Teams evaluation were additionally presented.

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

On September 27, 2021, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to report to the Board of Health to identify successful strategies and programs arising from efforts to target equity-deserving populations and make recommendations to transition successful emergency COVID-19 responses into permanent, long-term embedded supports including the alignment of public health, health care and social services, wherever appropriate.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.HL30.1>

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

In December 2020, the Board of Health endorsed TO Supports: COVID-19 Equity Action Plan and 25 equity actions and targeted measures. TO Supports is the guiding framework of equity measures developed and implemented since March 2020 by the City to support Torontonians disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. This report responds to the Board of Health's request on March 21, 2022 for an update on TO Supports: Equity Action Plan, including Vaccine Engagement Teams.

TO Supports has evolved in response to new information, new partnerships, and new pandemic conditions. TO Supports also documents impacts, gaps and emerging priorities, and serves as an accountability tool with community until the pandemic is resolved and pathways to an equitable recovery in Toronto are in place.

This report provides a high-level summary and implementation update on select TO Supports initiatives, including:

- TO Supports Investment Fund;
- COVID-19 Emergency Food Response;
- COVID-19 Mental Health Support Strategy;
- Community Coordination Plan;
- Equity Action Plan; and
- Vaccine Engagement Teams.

TO Supports Investment Fund

The TO Supports Investment Fund provided emergency funding to support individuals disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific themes of the TO Supports Investment Fund include food access, mental health, housing and homelessness, community safety and wellbeing, family support, income support social connection, and community sector support.

Funding was made available from three combined sources: (1) a 20% carve out of the provincial Social Services Relief Fund provided to the City, (2) the Canadian Medical Association Foundation through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and (3) private donors.

The TO Supports Investment Fund leveraged the integrated networks built by the Community Coordination Plan to prioritize funding for equity deserving groups using real-time data from 211/FindHelp, and the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC).

From June to December 2020, over \$9.7 million was distributed through the TO Supports Investment Fund across its various themes.

The TO Supports Investment Fund has concluded. A comprehensive report on the funding allocated and impact is being presented to Economic and Community Development Committee on April 28, 2022, and City Council at their May 2022 meeting.

COVID-19 Mental Health Support Strategy

As community agencies halted in-person mental health services and supports due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Torontonians were left without access to the mental health services and supports they desperately needed. In response, in April 2020 the City of Toronto developed the COVID-19 Mental Health Support Strategy in order to support the diverse mental health needs of Toronto residents during this time.

In partnership with 24 community-based mental health organizations, the COVID-19 Mental Health Support Strategy provided streamlined access to critical mental health support completely free of charge to support vulnerable residents that may be experiencing stress, grief and loss, anxiety, depression or other mental health stressors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Services are available for children and youth, seniors, frontline workers and those intersectional identities, such as Indigenous, Black, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQ2S+ Torontonians.

In partnership with eight of the community-based mental health organizations, the COVID-19 Mental Health Support Strategy streamlined the collection of service-access data for mental health supports. From April 2020 to March 2022, partners have reported:

- Over 102,400 seniors and 8,600 youth either received direct supports or were referred to other mental health partners for support services;
- Over 284,000 people either called, texted or sent an online message for mental health supports; and
- Over 253,700 people received direct mental health support, and over 30,400 received referrals to mental health supports.

The most commonly requested needs include support groups, crisis lines, in-home care and assistance for seniors or persons with disabilities, in-person crisis support, addictions treatment/counselling, and mental health programs.

The work of the COVID-19 Mental Health Support Strategy has been extended for part of 2022. A comprehensive report on the funding allocated and impact is being presented to Economic and Community Development Committee on April 28, 2022, and City Council at their May 2022 meeting.

COVID-19 Emergency Food Response

In March 2020, as a response to the effects of the pandemic, the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) established a staff team to work with key partners to launch a city-wide emergency response to support food banks with space needs, facilitate large scale meal production and food delivery, direct donations and funding to neighbourhood food programs, and invest in long-term community food resilience and access barriers.

Key elements and outcomes of the City's Emergency Food Response between March 2020 and December 2021, includes:

- \$4.5 million was distributed to 38 organizations to provide community-driven and informed food security initiatives in underserved neighbourhoods and individuals across the City through the TO Supports Investment Fund;
- Over \$1 million was received through the COVID-19 DonateTO portal for emergency food programs and matched to community needs;
- 6,000 households/46,000 individuals were served at 12 emergency food banks which opened in Toronto Public Library locations from April-June 2020;
- 65,578 food hampers were delivered by the Canadian Red Cross, under contract to the City, for seniors and other isolated residents without food supports between spring 2020 and fall 2021;
- 730,000+ prepared meals were distributed in partnership with over 169 community agencies across Toronto;
- 114,000 children from 60,000 families received \$50 grocery cards when schools were closed in 2020, through repurposing of municipal student nutrition grants and other funds raised;
- 200,000 students received healthy food each school day when schools were reopened;
- 3,000 seedlings donated for local urban food growing, resulting in 750 pounds of produce donated to Daily Bread Food Bank and the Salvation Army; and
- The City helped advance the Community Engagement and Entrepreneurial Development "CEED" gardens on Hydro land corridors in Flemingdon Park and Malvern, both which became operational in 2021, and provided fresh, and culturally appropriate produce to local emergency food responses.

The Emergency Food Response continues, and is led by Social Development, Finance, and Administration's Poverty Reduction Strategy Office. A report on "Food Equity Actions" will be presented to City Council in 2023, in the 2023-2026 Poverty Reduction Strategy Action Plan, and will include emergency food provision, food systems, and resilience post-pandemic.

Community Coordination Plan

The Community Coordination Plan was developed in March 2020 by the City of Toronto and United Way Greater Toronto to ensure communication and coordination with more than 400 community-based agencies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This new model of partnership implements service coordination and hyper-local solutions across ten geographic clusters and two non-geographic clusters.

The Community Coordination Plan continues to develop agile community-based responses to address emerging needs and service gaps, with a focus on equity-deserving groups and neighbourhoods disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. From March 2020 to December 2021, the Community Coordination Plan has implemented a number of initiatives to support agency partners and vulnerable community members, including:

- **Community Coordination Plan Grant:** Distributed \$715,000 to address priority issues experienced by vulnerable residents, including food access initiatives, mental health supports, capacity development initiatives on anti-black racism, and community-based research projects.

- **Neighbourhood Pods TO:** In June 2020, TO Supports funding was allocated to Neighbourhood Pods TO, to develop hyper-local networks that aimed to strengthen meaningful community member connections by prioritizing solidarity, wellbeing, mutual aid, and self-organization across Toronto. As of December 2021, a total allocation of \$615,000 has been made available to help agency partners support the development of Neighbourhood Pods, and over 133 pods and pod leaders remain active across Toronto.
- **Donation Management:** The Toronto Office of Partnerships and the Purchasing and Materials Management Division. As of November 2021, the Community Coordination Plan had distributed the following donations:
 - 669,000 disposable and reusable face masks for adults and children;
 - 40,000 face shields for adults and children; and
 - 414,700 personal hygiene and sanitary products like hand sanitizer, toiletries, and diapers.

Equity Action Plan

The Equity Action Plan was launched in June 2020, with funding from the TO Supports Investment Fund. The plan is a multi-dimensional emergency response to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and delivering immediate emergency support to neighbourhoods and populations disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. The Equity Action Plan leverages the integrated networks built by the Community Coordination Plan to allocate funding and mobilize resources.

From June 2020 to October 2020, the City of Toronto distributed \$6.87 million to community and health service agencies through the Equity Action Plan to deliver targeted outreach, emergency social supports, case management, food, mental health services, and provision of personal protective equipment (PPE). In December 2021, an additional \$1.4 million was distributed through as a part of the Toronto Omicron Action Plan and will be completed in July 2022.

From June 2020 to September 2021, the Equity Action Plan had directly engaged with over 136,000 children and youth, and over 407,000 adults and seniors across Toronto, providing focused support in the following areas:

- 49,891 individuals received COVID-19 tests through local Community Health Centres;
- 176,518 individuals received food access support, including delivery of groceries, prepared meals and food hampers;
- 37,438 individuals/families received isolation supports, including prescription delivery, remote learning activities, hygiene kits, and personal care items;
- 15,839 individuals received informal mental health supports such as online peer support groups and wellness check-ins;
- 199,362 individuals received general COVID-19 information on prevention, self-isolation, school screening, and vaccination; and
- 83,634 individuals received peer wellness check-ins and engaged in online peer support groups.

Vaccine Engagement Teams

The Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan builds on the City's TO Supports equity measures by leveraging community expertise and partnerships to facilitate and promote vaccine uptake across all of Toronto. Vaccine Engagement Teams are a key component, and support equity-deserving groups disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, as well as other racialized communities that have historically experienced systemic oppression and exploitation from government and medical institutions.

Social Development, Finance and Administration has been leading the coordination of this plan in partnership with Toronto Public Health, and other City divisions. The plan includes both a place-based approach to support residents in all 158 neighbourhoods of the city and a population-specific approach to reach communities hardest hit by the pandemic. Funding for Vaccine Engagement Teams leveraged the integrated networks built by the Community Coordination Plan using data from Toronto Public Health.

Vaccine Engagement Teams are comprised of over 200 health, community and faith-based organizations, and operate through ten geographic clusters and seven population-based consortiums. 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.

Since March 2021, the City of Toronto has distributed over \$9.5 million to Vaccine Engagement Teams. Indigenous organizations have been provided over \$1 million to self-determine culturally-appropriate engagement strategies. From March 2021 to December 2021, Vaccine Engagement Teams engaged over 1.5 million Torontonians.

Community Ambassadors Mobilized

Vaccine Engagement Teams have mobilized over 600 Community Ambassadors to build vaccine confidence, provide access to vaccine resources, and amplify public health messaging across their networks. These trained community leaders 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.

Community Ambassadors reflect the diversity in culture, race, and language of Toronto's equity-deserving groups, and facilitate extensive outreach to individuals and communities that align with their age, cultural/racial identity, and languages spoken. Community Ambassadors focus their outreach 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.

From March 2021 to December 2021, Community Ambassadors spent over 46,000 hours conducting outreach in over 43 different languages, and engaging people using a wide range of outreach activities, including:

- 4,900 engagements that supported individuals in navigating the COVID-19 vaccine registration system and finding a vaccine clinic in their neighbourhood;
- 2300 public setting engagement sessions in parks, lobbies, or shopping centres;
- 2200 direct phone engagement sessions, often cold-calling or through a phone bank;
- 1600 sessions of online social media engagement like education campaigns or group-based virtual events;
- 1300 door-to-door outreach shifts in both market and social housing communities; and
- 500 engagement sessions with people experiencing homelessness.

From March 2021 to December 2021, Ambassadors additionally supported vaccine access and related services by providing:

- 15,000 pre-filled Presto cards and 4,700 ridesharing vouchers to those facing transportation barriers accessing to vaccine clinics;
- 2000 referrals to local community or health services;
- 2295 referrals to COVID-19 testing sites; and
- 790 support sessions at local vaccine clinics for on-site registration and coordination of community members.

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 informs responsive strategies to address identified issues. These strategies have included culturally-responsive education campaigns, mobile clinics, and translated materials in diverse languages.

Social Development, Finance and Administration, Toronto Public Health, and an evaluation partner, Taylor Newberry Consulting, are leading an evaluation of Vaccine Engagement Teams to assess the value of these efforts including the role of the Vaccine Engagement Teams in enhancing access for equity-deserving group in Toronto and enhancing vaccine confidence. Preliminary evaluation findings were presented at the December 6, 2021 meeting of the Board of Health. The findings indicated Vaccine Engagement Teams are a responsive and effective model for place-based strategic planning, hyper-local engagement, collaboration, and a vehicle for ongoing community ambassador training and employment skill development. The complete findings from the Vaccine Engagement Teams evaluation will be presented at the May 16, 2022 meeting of the Board of Health, and will include qualitative and quantitative data gathered from community ambassadors and the Torontonians they engaged, consortium coordinators, partner agencies, and City staff from April 2021-March 2022.

Transitioning Vaccine Engagement Team Infrastructure to Recovery and Resiliency

Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration have identified an ongoing need for equity-focused outreach. A post-pandemic recovery must

respond to the compounded health and well-being effects on equity-deserving populations during COVID-19, and remain adaptable to potential changes in public health mandates driven by future variants, hospitalization rates, or additional vaccine doses.

The findings from the Vaccine Engagement Teams evaluation will inform a proposed transition of Vaccine Engagement Teams to support a more equitable pandemic recovery over the next 9-12 months, and provide valuable data that can inform a longer-term hyper-local, equity-focused, culturally responsive engagement model for public health, health care, and social services. This future model would include an expanded focus on the social determinants of health and would seek to enable the enhanced, navigation, access and peer to peer benefits that have been successfully captured within the TO Supports and Vaccine Engagement Teams model.

Further details will be provided by Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration in a report to the May 16, 2022 meeting of the Board of Health.

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SIGNATURE

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