

Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan Update

Date: May 2, 2022

To: Board of Health

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

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides findings from the evaluation of the Vaccine Engagement Teams initiative, and responds to the Board of Health direction to provide recommendations for extending the successful work of Vaccine Engagement Teams in order to continue supporting the COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

The Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan is a key part of the City of Toronto's COVID-19 vaccination program. It leverages community expertise and partnerships through Vaccine Engagement Teams to facilitate and promote equitable vaccine uptake across Toronto. A program evaluation of the initiative found that Vaccine Engagement Teams have been an effective strategy for increasing vaccine confidence, access, and uptake among diverse communities across Toronto.

Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration have identified a continued need for equity-focused outreach that prioritizes populations most impacted by COVID-19 and with lowest vaccine uptake, children under the age of five, and those who are eligible for fourth and booster doses. Given this need, and an expected seasonal increase in COVID-19 activity in the fall, there is a need to extend the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan until at least December 31, 2022 and to continue to review and further extend the program as required to support the COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

The Vaccine Engagement Team model has proven valuable in promoting uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine, and offers promise as an approach to reducing socioeconomic barriers to government services, including public health, healthcare and social services. Additional information is needed about the use of this model to support health care access outside of COVID-19 response. Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration will work with health and social service system partners to determine deployment options for this model in an impactful way. This work will be

undertaken as part of broader recovery efforts and an update will be provided to the Board of Health in the first quarter of 2023.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health, in partnership with Social Development, Finance and Administration, to extend the Vaccine Engagement Teams until at least December 31, 2022, and to continue to review and further extend the program as required to support the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, and submit associated expenditures to the Ministry of Health for reimbursement.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The COVID-19 immunization expenditures, including funding for Vaccine Engagement initiative are unfunded and are over the approved 2022 Operating Budget for the City. The Ministry of Health has indicated that eligible extraordinary costs for vaccination campaigns over and above the provincial grant will be reimbursed. To the extent provincial funding is not provided, it will put pressure on the City's budget and reserves.

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 rates of vaccination.

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 April 11, 2022, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, to include recommendations for extending the successful work of Vaccine Engagement Teams to continue supporting the COVID-19 vaccination

campaign, as part of the report to the Board of Health at its meeting on May 16, 2022. Additionally, to include recommendations for adapting the community-based Vaccine Engagement Teams model to address other health inequities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of the report to the Board of Health on the development of new approaches to address public health issues at its meeting on June 20, 2022.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2022.HL36.2>

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

The City has implemented an equity driven, culturally responsive model for vaccine engagement and sector support

The Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan builds on the City's TO Supports Equity Action Plan by leveraging community expertise and partnerships to facilitate and promote vaccine uptake across Toronto. 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 is comprehensive and considers the social determinants of health, such as race, income, food security, healthcare access, housing and disability, to drive focused equity actions for the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. Vaccine Engagement Teams are a key component of the Plan, and support populations disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. The model includes both a place-based

approach to support communities in all Toronto neighbourhoods and a population-specific approach to reach groups throughout the city with shared experiences of systemic barriers.

Vaccine Engagement Teams are comprised of over 200 health, community and faith-based organizations that operate through 17 consortiums. Consortiums use a variety of tailored 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, including over \$835,000 to Black-Mandated organizations. Additionally, Indigenous organizations have received over \$1.1 million to self-determine culturally appropriate vaccine engagement strategies.

Community Ambassadors Mobilized

Vaccine Engagement Teams have mobilized over 600 Community Ambassadors since March 2021. These community leaders act as trusted peers, serve as 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 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.

Monitoring and evaluation have shown that the Vaccine Engagement Teams have reduced barriers to COVID-19 vaccination

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

Between March 2021 and March 2022, Community Ambassadors spent over 70,000 hours building vaccine confidence by engaging with Torontonians more than 2.3 million times in 43 different languages. Ambassadors employed a wide range of outreach activities including:

- 8,000 engagements that supported individuals in navigating the COVID-19 vaccine registration system and finding a vaccine clinic in their neighbourhood;
- 5,100 sessions of online and social media engagement such as health education posts and group-based virtual engagement events;

- 3,500 public setting engagement sessions in parks, residential building lobbies, or shopping centres;
- 2,600 direct phone engagement sessions, often cold-calling or through a phone bank;
- 1,600 door-to-door outreach shifts in both market and social housing communities; and
- 650 people experiencing homelessness engaged through street outreach or during drop-in programs.

Ambassadors also reduced barriers to access for vaccines and other health and social services during this period by providing:

- 15,000 pre-filled Presto cards and 4,700 ridesharing vouchers to those facing transportation barriers;
- 2,700 referrals to COVID-19 testing sites;
- 2,500 referrals to local community or health services; and
- 900 support sessions at local vaccine clinics for on-site registration and coordination of community members.

Vaccine Engagement Teams Program Evaluation

In December 2021, Social Development, Finance and Administration and Toronto Public Health, presented preliminary findings from an evaluation of the Vaccine Engagement Teams to the Board of Health (see Item [HL24.2](#)). Conducted in partnership with Taylor Newberry Consulting, the evaluation sought to determine the extent to which Vaccine Engagement Teams increased vaccine confidence and access for equity-deserving groups in Toronto.

The final evaluation report captured qualitative and quantitative data gathered between March 2021 and March 2022 through focus groups, key informant interviews, and surveys with all stakeholder groups. Administrative data such as activities, output tracking, and participation were also included via document reviews of regular reports from consortiums and Community Ambassadors.

The evaluation identified the following key themes:

- **Innovative and Effective Model for Place-Based Community and Health Programming:** The findings from the evaluation data indicate that the model is effective at increasing vaccine confidence and vaccine access through hyper-local peer engagement. Strong relationships and streamlined communication across all partnership levels was foundational to the program's success. Regular, biweekly insights from Community Ambassadors enabled Vaccine Engagement Teams to respond effectively to the changing landscape.
- **Responsive and Effective Community Ambassador Training, Community Building, Outreach and Engagement Methods:** The evaluation findings show that Community Ambassadors felt that the training opportunities and level of support they received from the City of Toronto and their respective Vaccine Engagement Teams prepared them to fulfil their roles. Community Ambassadors and Consortium

Coordinators reported feeling better prepared for future employment and leadership opportunities as well as an increased sense of connection to their communities. Data showed that the Ambassadors' outreach activities were tailored to community needs and the changing health and social landscapes. The findings also show that the diverse language, culture and outreach approaches of Ambassadors contributed significantly to effective trust building and increased vaccine confidence in communities.

- **Increased Vaccine Confidence, Access and Equity:** The evaluation data indicate that Vaccine Engagement Teams have effectively increased vaccine confidence, access and uptake in their communities. Community Ambassadors, those they engaged, and community agencies reported and vaccination data indicated that both geographic and population-focused approaches were successful at increasing confidence in and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines including the mitigation of technological barriers. The findings suggest that new and persistent barriers to vaccination remain, and present opportunities for continued outreach and peer engagement.
- **Community Responses to Outreach Efforts:** While many community members welcomed the presence of the Community Ambassadors and while vaccine uptake increased with their intervention, there were members of the communities who continued to have misgivings about vaccines and occasionally displayed hostility. Reports of hostility increased with expanded protests against public health measures. Most Community Ambassadors report having the necessary resources to manage hostile encounters safely, and recommend enhanced training, outreach in pairs, and proactive public messaging from the City of Toronto and Toronto Public Health.
- **Effective Interdivisional Coordination and Community-Based Partnership:** Evaluation data show that the majority of City, agency and Community Ambassador survey respondents were satisfied with the partnerships available to them through the Vaccine Engagement Teams model. Community Ambassadors and agency representatives were satisfied with the services and resources provided by the City. They reported developing an increased understanding of, and access to, COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 programs and services offered by the City. City employees reported that, despite challenges related to limited time to plan and start the initiative, new and stronger collaborations with other City divisions were built. An internal evaluation supplemented these findings, identifying that the success of the Vaccine Engagement Teams model was due in large part to significant efforts by City staff to collaboratively develop and implement the initiative.

The Vaccine Engagement Team model may be used to address other health and social inequities in the future

The evaluation findings demonstrate that the Vaccine Engagement Teams model was effective at reducing barriers to vaccine uptake, access and equity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the successes of Vaccine Engagement Teams in mitigating inequitable outcomes related to COVID-19, Toronto Public Health and Social

Development, Finance and Administration recommend exploring use of this engagement-based and community-capacity building model to reduce other inequities.

Many health and social inequities in Toronto are complex in nature, and require a range of different interventions and behaviours to address. Further work is needed to determine which issues might be appropriately and effectively addressed (in whole or in part) by the Vaccine Engagement Teams model. This work must be done in collaboration with stakeholders that are responsible for the delivery of health and social services, such as Ontario Health, hospitals, and social service agencies, primary care settings, and should also consider the associated resourcing requirements. In cases where this work falls within the mandate of the City, Social Development, Finance and Administration specifically, and/or Toronto Public Health, it will need to be considered more comprehensively in relation to other strategies to resume paused or scaled-back services and programming, and other new and emerging priorities.

Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration will draw on the rich evaluation data and lessons learned through the course of the pandemic in the course of recovery planning. A report will be brought to Board of Health in the first quarter of 2023 with an update on how the Vaccine Engagement Teams model is being used, its impact on health inequities brought about by COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its potential for advancing other facets of health equity in Toronto.

The work of the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan needs to be extended to address ongoing and anticipated future COVID-19 related needs

Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration have identified an ongoing need for equity-focused community outreach to continue. The prioritization of populations most impacted by COVID-19 remains necessary, as does the immunization of children under the age of five and uptake of fourth and booster doses to those who are eligible. The City must also remain adaptable to potential changes in public health mandates driven by future variants, hospitalization rates, or additional vaccine doses, and plan for an expected seasonal increase in COVID-19 activity in the fall.

Given the promising results of the evaluation and the ongoing need for equity-focused outreach, it is recommended that the Community Immunization Engagement and Mobilization Plan continue to operate until at least December 31, 2022, and that Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration pursue further extensions of the program if there continues to be a need to support the COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The City will make funds available for this purpose and seek reimbursement from the Province of Ontario for these extraordinary costs incurred in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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