

Update on COVID-19 response and other public health functions

Date: June 6, 2022

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on Toronto Public Health's (TPH) response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and addresses direction from the Board of Health to provide an update on the resumption of programs that were paused or scaled-back due to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as planning to address emerging public health priorities.

With key indicators showing that the sixth wave of the COVID-19 is subsiding, TPH is developing and implementing plans to resume or expand non-COVID-19 related public health functions, as resources permit. However, there remains an ongoing need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including potential future surges. In the short-term, TPH is planning to maintain capacity to respond to COVID-19, while also focusing on other major health issues that affect Torontonians.

Toronto Public Health has identified three key goals that will guide this work: 1) to maintain and improve the health status of Toronto's population, 2) to reduce inequities in health status, and 3) to prepare for and respond to outbreaks of disease and public health emergencies. The pursuit of these goals will be informed by evidence-informed decision-making, centered on equity considerations, and premised on the understanding that public health is a public good that benefits the whole community.

With this in mind, TPH has identified the following as priorities for action for the remainder of 2022 and into 2023:

- continuing COVID-19 response and incorporating lessons learned from the COVID-19 response to support TPH's readiness for other emerging public health issues,
- responding to the drug poisoning epidemic,
- promoting mental health, and
- rebuilding public health functions.

Each of these priorities encompasses a range of actions that aim to maximize the impact and benefit to the overall health of Torontonians, such as restoring routine public

health programming, reducing service backlogs, and collaborating with partners to expand access to resources, programs, and services.

In working to achieve these short-term priorities, TPH will continue to collaborate with other orders of government and partner organizations, especially in relation to the development of policies that support the social determinants of health. This work must also be accompanied by efforts to acknowledge and support the staff that have worked tirelessly to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, invest in their well-being and resilience, and provide the tools and infrastructure to assist them in serving the public as TPH embarks on this next phase in working towards a healthier Toronto.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to report back to the Board of Health in 2023 with an update on new, resumed, and enhanced public health functions, as well as a process for the development of a new strategic plan to guide Toronto Public Health's long-term priorities.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact associated with the adoption of the recommendation in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of March 21, 2022, the Board of Health adopted Item HL35.1 "Response to COVID-19 - March 2022 Update" and requested the Medical Officer of Health to review Toronto Public Health functions and services that were paused or reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and report back to the Board of Health with an update on functions and services to be resumed, as well as the development of new approaches to address public health issues and inequities that have emerged over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as issues that existed prior to the pandemic.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2022.HL35.1>

COMMENTS

Status of the COVID-19 pandemic

Multiple indicators show that the sixth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is subsiding in Toronto. The seven day moving average of COVID-19 cases has further declined to 197 new cases, as of May 31, 2022. Although provincial testing restrictions means that COVID-19 cases are undercounted, and that the true number of cases is higher, other indicators affirm this decreasing trend. Levels of COVID-19 in wastewater are stable or

decreasing across all of Toronto's wastewater treatment plans. Although they are lagging indicators, the seven day moving averages for daily new hospitalizations and intensive care admissions due to COVID-19 have also declined to five and less than one, respectively.

Given positive trends in the local epidemiology, TPH is gradually restarting certain public health functions that were paused during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time TPH is looking to expand work to address public health issues that have emerged or were exacerbated over the last two and a half years.

The COVID-19 pandemic required Toronto Public Health to reallocate resources to respond urgently to the public health emergency

The emergence of COVID-19 presented an urgent threat to public health that required an immediate and wide-ranging response from public health agencies, including TPH. As the largest public health unit in Canada, Toronto Public Health plays a lead role in preventing the spread of disease and using surveillance to monitor the health status of the population to respond to emerging health needs. Due to the scale of the COVID-19 response, TPH paused most routine public health functions and redeployed the majority of staff to COVID-19 response. This maintained operations of a small number of critical programs and services (for example, environmental health inspections and investigations, responding to the drug poisoning epidemic, and critical communicable disease control activities).

This reallocation of resources directly contributed to Toronto Public Health reducing the risk that COVID-19 poses to population health in Toronto. Through their extensive efforts, TPH staff and partners have achieved significant milestones in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- the largest vaccination campaign in Toronto's history, which achieved high levels of vaccination against COVID-19 with nearly 90 percent of Toronto residents aged 12 and older having received at least two doses,
- the implementation of an extensive, equity-focused vaccination campaign, which has brought the COVID-19 vaccine and other supports to neighbourhoods and communities most impacted by COVID-19,
- extensive surveillance, case and contact, and cluster investigation and outbreak management activities, which helped maximize TPH's reach by enabling a focused response to COVID-19,
- a wide-ranging public education campaign and detailed guidance and support for a range of sectors across Toronto, including schools, businesses, and congregate settings,
- timely efforts to develop COVID-19 policies and measures to protect the health of Torontonians, and support the pandemic response, and
- support for TPH and City of Toronto (City) initiatives that enable economic recovery and social connection while simultaneously mitigating the risk of COVID-19 transmission (for example, CafeTO and ActiveTO).

Where resource constraints have precluded work on pre-pandemic functions and activities, other City divisions and organizations have provided important programming and services that support population health. Toronto Public Health is grateful for these

efforts, which include work to promote community safety and well-being, work to advance a healthier and more sustainable food system, and the provision of supports for vulnerable populations.

Toronto Public Health is taking a strategic approach to the resumption of non-COVID-19-related functions

Toronto Public Health and partner organizations have made significant progress in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is evident in the declining rates of severe outcomes associated with COVID-19 in Toronto, relative to earlier points in the pandemic. Given the success in reducing the risk and impact of COVID-19 in Toronto, TPH is working to resume or expand its non-COVID-related functions to address other pressing public health issues as resources permit. In doing so, TPH will prioritize and focus efforts on activities and interventions with the goals of:

- maintaining and improving the health status of Toronto's population,
- reducing inequities in health status, and
- preparing to respond to outbreaks of disease and public health emergencies.

Toronto Public Health will apply three guiding principles in the pursuit of these goals:

1. Evidence-informed decision making: Use public health science and data, such as health status assessment, surveillance data, and published research to set priorities and develop public health interventions for multiple and complex health issues.

2. Equity: Prioritize interventions that both improve overall population health, as well as reduce health disparities across groups. The assessment of how to decrease inequities is particularly important now as pre-existing health, social and economic disparities have been highlighted and deepened by the pandemic.

3. Public health is a public good: Public health is a public good in that it serves and benefits all members of society. Accordingly, policies will be developed transparently and with public input. Public health functions are funded through public resources, and TPH must be accountable for them and for its performance in protecting the health of the public.

Toronto Public Health has identified key priorities for the short-term

With these goals and principles in mind, TPH has identified some of the most urgent and immediate public health needs facing Torontonians. These include increases in mental health conditions and problematic substance use, decreases in healthy behaviours, and decreases in testing and screening for preventable or treatable communicable and chronic diseases.

These issues are complex and require long-term action informed by a detailed population health assessment and consultations with key stakeholders. However, given the pressing need, TPH has identified interim priority areas of focus.

Priority One: Continuing to respond to COVID-19 and supporting TPH's readiness for other emerging public health issues

Nearly two and half years since the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Toronto on January 25, 2020, SARS-CoV-2 (the virus which causes COVID-19) is still evolving and circulating in the community. Most recently this has occurred with the Omicron variant and its related lineages and sub-variants. Toronto Public Health must monitor and assess the need to respond to the changing morbidity and mortality of COVID-19 and its impact on the community, and act accordingly.

While the ongoing response to COVID-19 still requires significant resources, TPH is also looking to apply lessons learned from the pandemic response to address other outbreaks or emerging public health issues that arise. The recent, local emergence of public health issues such as monkeypox, acute pediatric hepatitis, and a late spring increase in influenza activity underscore this need. While maintaining sufficient resourcing to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and any potential surge, TPH will collaborate with partners including the Ministry of Health and identify resources that can be deployed quickly to respond to new challenges as they arise.

Priority Two: Responding to the drug poisoning epidemic

The drug poisoning epidemic is one example of an urgent health priority that requires the attention of Toronto Public Health in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 response. Rates of opioid-related harms, particularly fatal overdose, have increased significantly in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic and public health practitioners have highlighted that we are responding to not one but two pandemics. In 2021, preliminary data from the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario show 511 confirmed and 54 probable opioid toxicity deaths in Toronto. This level of opioid overdose deaths is in line with trends observed in 2020, but represents a 74 percent increase from 2019 and a 273 percent increase from 2015.

Toronto Public Health is prioritizing action to address this issue in the short-term. Key activities include facilitating the development and implementation of evidence-based primary substance-use prevention across the lifespan; working with partners to expand low-barrier access to safer supply programs, harm reduction, treatment and health and social services, for those most at-risk of drug-related harm; and continuing to work with Health Canada and other community stakeholders on an alternative approach to drug criminalization for Toronto.

Priority Three: Promoting mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the mental health and well-being of our community, individuals, and families. More people are reporting increases in stress and anxiety, including children and youth who have been impacted by school closures and interruptions. Compared to pre-pandemic levels there was an increase in suicidal ideation in Ontario, which quadrupled among those 40-49 years of age, tripled among men, and doubled among those aged 18-19.

While not directly responsible for the delivery of mental health services, TPH will explore

how it can work with partners and contribute to the development of effective strategies to improve mental health at a population level, such as contributing to the collation of local mental health data and evidence, and contribute to the development of a post-pandemic mental health strategy for implementation by a range of partners. Toronto Public Health is also using every opportunity to better integrate mental health promotion into existing health promotion work such as chronic disease prevention, healthy growth and development for children, school health, and substance use and injury prevention. TPH is also exploring partnerships with other City divisions and community organizations to improve access to mental health resources in Toronto.

Priority Four: Rebuilding public health functions

During the pandemic the majority of TPH staff were redeployed to the COVID-19 response. As a result, many routine public health programs were paused or scaled down, causing a backlog of health promotion and protection activities. While some functions have resumed in their pre-pandemic form, other services will need to be adapted or rebuilt in order to meet the changing needs of the population.

Toronto Public Health's work is focused first on programs that address the most urgent needs and have significant impact on population health, as well as programs that focus on groups facing disadvantage and barriers to good health. In addition, TPH is aiming to reduce backlogs in service where they exist and where the benefit of responding to the backlog continues to be present or is significant. See Appendix A for further details.

Toronto Public Health is committed to applying lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuilding public health to meet the population's needs

Toronto's health and social landscape has shifted over the course of the past two and a half years. As TPH gradually resumes some public health functions, it is important to consider not only what functions are brought back, but how they might be improved to meet Toronto's current public health needs.

The response to COVID-19 presented opportunities for TPH to demonstrate its capacity to meet local needs—despite major resource challenges—through technological innovation, enhanced coordination with a wide range of partners, and improved health equity approaches for particular groups. It is clear that this cooperative, nimble, and innovative approach was impactful. It offers a promising model to respond to the other pressing health issues facing Toronto in a way that is transparent and builds public trust. To this end, TPH will continue to engage key stakeholders, including partner organizations, the Board of Health, and Torontonians through the process of resuming and expanding public health functions in the near future.

Fostering a resilient workforce and supporting organizational excellence is key to implementing TPH's short-term priorities

As TPH gradually transitions back to providing routine public health functions, it is important to celebrate how the public health workforce has worked—and continues to work—tirelessly to protect the health of Toronto residents, while balancing the need to

recover and promote staff wellness. Investing in and fostering a resilient workforce is a key priority that undergirds all of the actions outlined in this report.

Toronto Public Health will seek to accomplish this through recognizing and acknowledging staff contributions, investing in structured training and skills development opportunities, developing a long-term recruitment and retention strategy, promoting and providing opportunities for staff connectedness, promoting diversity and inclusion in the work environment, and ensuring a healthy and safe workplace. Toronto Public Health will further its commitment to providing high-quality programming to the public by exploring and improving the processes and infrastructure that enable effective public health practice and organizational excellence (for example, information and technology systems enabling hybrid service delivery), and in working to expand and strengthen partnerships and collaborations at the local, regional, and national levels.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has constituted the major area of TPH's focus over the past two and a half years. As the sixth wave of pandemic subsides, TPH is working in accordance with core public health principles to resume or expand its non-COVID-19-related functions as resources permit, while also turning attention to other pressing population health issues facing Toronto and investing in TPH's workforce and capabilities to tackle these issues in the years to come. Toronto Public Health will keep the Board of Health apprised of its progress and will report back in 2023 with further information on a process to develop a strategic plan to address longer-term priorities.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Appendix A: Re-started and scaled-up Toronto Public Health functions