

**Update on COVID-19**  
**Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health**  
**April 1, 2020 at 10 a.m.**  
**Members' Lounge, Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.**

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I am here today to provide you with an update on COVID-19, looking in particular at where we've been over the past several weeks, where we are now, what we've learned from other jurisdictions and their respective COVID-19 experiences, and where I believe we need to go as a city in order to achieve three primary objectives as we respond to this outbreak.

And these objectives are, to as much as possible:

- Reduce the loss of life from COVID-19;
- Preserve and protect the capacity of our health care system to respond and to provide care for those who need it – whether for COVID-19 or for other medical conditions;
- And third, to minimize social and economic impacts of COVID-19.

It's hard to believe but as I am speaking to you on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, although many of us feel like we can hardly remember a time before there was COVID-19, I recognize that it has only been:

- 91 days since we welcomed the New Year
- 84 days since Toronto Public Health issued its first statement about what we then referred to as the novel coronavirus
- 64 days since we had our first confirmed case in Toronto of this new viral infection, and
- 50 days since the World Health Organization gave the disease caused by this new coronavirus the name, COVID-19

I could continue counting down the days, marking significant events and occurrences related to COVID-19 but no matter how we look at it, I can simply summarize it as this: COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on our world and on our city.

The logo for Toronto Public Health features a stylized building icon to the left of the word "TORONTO" in a bold, sans-serif font. Below "TORONTO" is the word "Public Health" in a smaller, regular sans-serif font.

# TORONTO

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This virus, which was only discovered in early January has given rise, as of yesterday, to almost 900,000 cases of COVID-19 and just over 42,000 deaths globally.

Here in Toronto, we have been monitoring COVID-19 activity since the beginning of the year. Our first case was confirmed in late January.

And fast forwarding to March, just two weeks ago, on March 18, Toronto had 102 confirmed cases and 43 probable COVID-19 cases, ten people in hospital and four people in intensive care units.

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, our numbers had climbed to 239 confirmed and 65 probable cases of COVID-19, with 14 individuals in hospital and 5 in intensive care beds.

And as of yesterday, March 31<sup>st</sup>, we reported 628 confirmed and 165 probable COVID-19 cases, with 65 people in hospital and 33 in intensive care units.

So to make this patently clear, in terms of our case counts, in the last two weeks, we have seen a more than 500% increase in these counts.

This is not a favourable trajectory. And as your Medical Officer of Health, responsible for protecting the city's health, your health, I am deeply concerned.

In addition to studying our own circumstances here in Toronto, we at Toronto Public Health have also been carefully monitoring the experiences and the approaches taken by other cities and countries around the world.

We have observed the comparative successes of countries like South Korea and Singapore, where case counts and the number of deaths have been significantly mitigated. And we have equally observed the challenges faced by places like Spain and Italy, where more than 10% of cases have died as a result of COVID-19.

Closer to home, we have also carefully monitored the experiences of New York City. Although it was not until March 1<sup>st</sup> that New York City reported its first case, by the end of the day yesterday, only one month after reporting their first case, New York City's case count for COVID-19 was almost 42,000 and their reported deaths numbered almost 1100.

And while the situation in New York City has captured our attention, being so close to us here in Toronto, we know that similar situations are occurring in cities all around the United States including Chicago, New Orleans and Seattle, just to name a few.

I realize that I depict a very stark picture here. A very stark picture, but one that is honest and true, and premised on the data we have in front of us.

Given this is our current situation, it is my belief that we must implement stronger measures to avoid the type of results we are seeing in places like New York City. One only has to look at the news to see what is happening there. Our colleagues in New York unfortunately are seeing a substantial loss of life, an overwhelmed healthcare system, and are experiencing significant social and economic disruptions, which are happening right now and I expect will have impact for many, many weeks and months to come.

This time, this outbreak, as we have said many times over the past several weeks, is truly an unprecedented situation. And as such, I feel the need, and the obligation to you, residents of Toronto, to use my powers as your Medical Officer of Health, to the greatest extent possible, to save lives, to reduce the impact on our healthcare system, and ultimately, to mitigate social and economic impacts on our city.

So with this in mind, I am using these powers as Medical Officer of Health, every power I have available to me, to recommend new measures based on the experiences of jurisdictions that have managed outbreaks successfully.

First, I am implementing strengthened case and contact measures. As you may have heard me say many times, case and contact investigation is the foundation of our work in public health when it comes to communicable disease control. We always do this with the greatest of care and seek to achieve the objectives of reducing the spread of communicable disease.



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However, given these unprecedented circumstances, I shall be issuing class orders under the Health Protection and Promotion Act, in order to emphasize the significance of self-isolation for those who are diagnosed with COVID-19, those who are suspected of having COVID-19, and those who are close contacts, as identified and contacted by public health in respect of COVID-19 cases.

My understanding is that my provincial counterparts are pursuing similar orders for the province as well. I want to emphasize that this represents an enhancement, an augmentation, of the work we are already doing. It is to emphasize the importance of those individuals, who are either diagnosed with COVID-19, or suspected of having COVID-19, or at high risk of having COVID-19 infection to self-isolate in order to reduce virus spread.

Second, I am putting forth measures to enhance social distancing, to enhance physical distancing. For those of you who have been listening to our briefings for the past few weeks, you will know that we have been speaking to the notion of physical distancing for quite some time now.

But today, as your Medical Officer of Health, I am saying in the strongest possible terms for the public to stay home as much as possible, and only to go out for the most essential of needs. Things like accessing health care, or getting medication. Limiting outings to get essentials like groceries as much as possible, ideally once a week, and where possible, even better, if those groceries can be accessed remotely or online.

Walking pets and getting daily exercise are also seen as reasonable things to do, while trying to stay home as much as possible. However, with all of these outings, I would remind members of the public to maintain physical distancing while out.

I can't emphasize enough that I am using the strongest terms possible to advise the public to stay home as much as possible, and only go out when needed for essentials.

Second, in respect of enhancing social distancing, or physical distancing, I am seeking to work with our provincial partners to reduce the number of open workplaces and businesses.



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To be clear, it is not within my jurisdiction as the local Medical Officer of Health to make determinations as to what businesses can remain open. But I assure you that we are working here at the City to actively engage our provincial partners to see what can be done to reduce the number of open workplaces and businesses so as to reduce virus spread while at the same time, meeting essential needs. We will be focusing these conversations on essential retail and services, and ensuring that those businesses are able to operate and provide the services that are needed – but to do so in a way that either maximizes remote opportunities, online opportunities, on call opportunities, so as to maximize physical distancing.

And for those businesses that have no option, where in person services must continue, for those businesses to maximize physical distancing where possible, and to engage in increased cleaning and active staff screening. Again, this is all with the singular focus on reducing virus spread and balancing that with the provision of essential services.

Next, I propose enhanced follow up for recently arrived travellers. As we know, our partners at the federal level of government have already issued orders under the Quarantine Act requiring that all travellers who have returned from travel outside of Canada are to self-isolate for a period of 14 days. This, like many other measures, has been put in place to reduce virus spread in our community. Through this measure, I am proposing enhanced follow up of these travellers, through the coordinated efforts of the federal, provincial and local levels of government, all working together to better ensure adherence to the quarantine orders as already issued by our federal partners.

And finally, I am proposing greater protections for those most vulnerable to COVID-19. I commend my provincial counterparts for the measures they have taken to date, the strong recommendations they made earlier this week, for those in our communities who are 70 years of age and older to stay home as much as possible.

I recognize as well that there are other populations within our community, within our city, that are also vulnerable to COVID-19. Those experiencing homelessness, and those who reside in long-term care and retirement home settings. I propose that we work together at the city level of government, and particularly with our provincial partners to ensure that better measures are in place to support, for



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example, the ability of those 70 years of age and older, to stay at home as much as possible.

We can do this, not only in partnership with our provincial counterparts, but as well in partnership with members of our volunteer sector, our not-for-profit sector, and private sector.

There are a number of other measures to help support physical distancing efforts and infection prevention and control in settings homeless individuals use and reside in and those as well in long-term care settings and retirement home settings.

In respect of the timing of these measures, I propose that we effect them immediately, and that we seek to implement those that are on this list as quickly as possible.

Based on the experiences of other jurisdictions, it is my belief that these measures may need to be in place for up to 12 weeks. But I would tell you that how long these measures need to be in place, how successful we are in terms of controlling virus spread, is entirely in our hands.

The more we are able to put these measures into place, the more we are able as a community to adhere to these measures, to adhere to the recommendations, the shorter will be the duration of these measures and the more effective we will be, most importantly, at reducing the loss of lives in our community.

As well, it is important to note that the more we are able to adhere to these measures, the more successful we will be in terms of preserving and protecting our health care services, which are so important to us as a community.

We will certainly monitor, as we have been doing for the past several weeks, the progression of the virus in our community, and observing not only what we see here in our city but what is happening elsewhere, in order that we can adjust our timing and the measures in a data and evidence-informed manner.



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Again, the goal of all these measures is to reduce the loss of life, to preserve the capacity of our health care system to respond to our needs, and to minimize, wherever possible, both the short and long-term economic impacts of this disease on our community.

In conclusion, I would say that the more we can, as Torontonians, rally together for the next 12 weeks to comply with these measures, the more we can make it through this challenge and protect ourselves, our loved ones and our entire city.

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**Media contact:** Lenore Bromley, Toronto Public Health, 416-338-7974,  
Lenore.Bromley@toronto.ca