

Chapter 14: Natural Death Surge Planning

Pandemic influenza is expected to result in excess deaths in the Region of Peel. Modeling used by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care for a pandemic of mild to moderate severity suggests that the Region of Peel can expect, over the duration of the pandemic, between 467 and 1,730 deaths due to influenza and its complications. The availability of vaccines and antiviral drugs could significantly reduce the expected number of deaths. A severe pandemic, however, could be associated with much higher mortality rates. If many deaths occur in a short-time frame, they could overwhelm current fatality management systems.

Peel Region Emergency Program (PREP) is working extensively with relevant stakeholders to plan for a natural death surge (e.g. the result of a pandemic). The purpose of this planning is to ensure that the management of dead bodies occurs as efficiently, effectively, and respectfully as possible during what will be a difficult time for all concerned.

A community response is needed to deal logically and systematically with a natural death surge. This should include first responders, emergency managers, hospitals, funeral homes, cemeteries, crematoria, and death registry offices. Changes to the normal processing of human remains may be required along with short-term adaptations to an organization's operating policies and procedures. Further details are available in the *Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan* and the *Funeral Service Guide to Pandemic Planning*.²¹

Natural death surge planning requires examination of each step in the management and processing of human remains to determine what issues might arise during a pandemic. Some of these issues are described below.

Pronouncement and Certification of Death

There are no statutory guidelines or requirements for who can pronounce death, although historically this responsibility has fallen to physicians, nurses, and nurse practitioners. At present, only physicians can complete a "Certificate of Death". This situation is currently under review at the provincial level, and the possibility of extending the authority to certify death to other health practitioners (in order to facilitate the processing of dead bodies during a pandemic) is being examined.

Infection Control

Deceased persons are not considered to be capable of transmitting influenza. No additional or special precautions are required when transporting or managing a body of a person known, or suspected, to have died of influenza.

²¹ Funeral Service Association of Canada. (2006). <http://www.fsac.ca/>

However, the people attending funeral services and visitations may be infected with influenza, either acquired from the deceased or elsewhere in the community. Funeral services and visitations provide a potentially efficient route for transmitting the influenza virus. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers, tissues, and proper disposal containers should be readily available in funeral homes and signs posted to encourage their use. Funeral home operators will be expected to pay special attention to the environmental cleaning of their premises.

All persons charged with responsibilities in the management of the deceased, from the pronouncement of death through to the interment, must be made aware of routine infection control precautions.

The Office of the Chief Coroner and Peel Public Health will provide assistance in identifying appropriate infection control procedures, and public health measures for gatherings, such as visitations and funerals. Specific advice is also available from the Funeral Services Association of Canada.

Supplies and Storage Capacity

The Funeral Service Association of Canada recommends that funeral home operators consider establishing an inventory of supplies sufficient to handle the first wave of a pandemic. This is estimated to be enough supplies for the number of deaths that normally occur over a six month period.

It is expected that at the peak of the influenza pandemic, the increased demand on funeral homes, cemeteries, and crematoria may require extended hours of operation. Even with this, it may not be possible to keep up and temporary storage sites for bodies may have to be established. Provincial direction is anticipated to assist with this planning.

Special Considerations

During natural death surge planning and response, special consideration must be given to the following:

- The Region of Peel is an ethno-culturally and religiously diverse community. Some religious and ethnic groups have special requirements regarding the management of deceased persons. Religious and ethnic leaders should be consulted during the planning process to ensure that their requirements are identified and incorporated into the natural death surge plan;
- The public will need to know the reporting and management process if a death occurs in the home. It is estimated that about 30% of deaths could occur at home; and
- Financial assistance may be needed for some families coping with burials.

Next Steps

- Multi-stakeholder planning to continue to address natural death surge strategy.