Executive Summary

Peel Public Health and COVID-19
An Equitable and Engaged Response
Key Messages

• On March 5, 2020, Peel Public Health confirmed the first positive case of COVID-19 in the Region. As of November 30, 2020, Peel had investigated approximately 27,000 confirmed and probable cases, and responded to over 300 outbreaks in institutions, workplaces, schools and child care centres.

• The goal of Peel Public Health’s COVID-19 response is to:
  – prevent severe illness and death in the community, due to all causes, including COVID-19,
  – protect health care system capacity and health care workers, and
  – minimize the societal and economic impacts of COVID-19 on the community.

• Peel’s pandemic response, to date and in the future, addresses health equity by acknowledging and analyzing how various determinants of health increase the risk of COVID-19 exposure, identifying disparities and inequities that drive transmission, mitigating the disproportionate impacts of public health measures, and by working to address impacts in engagement with community and stakeholders.

• Together, with continued delivery of critical public health functions (e.g. harm reduction programming, immunization, and management of other communicable diseases of public health significance), Peel Public Health’s COVID-19 response includes leadership in the following mandated areas:
  – Case, contact and outbreak management
  – Epidemiologic surveillance and reporting
  – Public health measures
  – Education, engagement, enforcement and leadership
  – Communication with the public, stakeholders and partners

• This document describes Peel Public Health’s response to the pandemic, as it relates to each of these mandated areas, with a particular focus on disparities and inequities in the population.
Case, Contact and Outbreak Management

Case, contact and outbreak management is fundamental to the COVID-19 response. Once Peel Public Health identifies a positive case of Covid-19, the individual is contacted to determine how they may have acquired the disease, what their current status is, and to whom they may have exposed the disease to. The goal of this contact is to ensure timely isolation, which will assist with preventing an outbreak.

Rapidly manage cases confirmed among Peel residents, to reduce transmission and ensure safe isolation

Activities to date:
• Conducting respectful verbal interviews in the language of the individual, their representative, or through language interpretation services.
• Collection of information to inform outbreak investigation and community exposures.

New activities:
• Ongoing assessment of emerging needs related to case, contact and outbreak management of Peel residents through a lens that considers the various determinants of health (e.g. income, education, ethnicity or race, employment).

Provide Peel residents who face barriers to COVID-19 self-isolation, with appropriate supports and services for home isolation and recovery

Activities to date:
• Self-isolation kits: In the early stages of the pandemic in 2020, Peel Public Health distributed self-isolation kits - including thermometers, alcohol swabs, and surgical masks - to households in the Region where positive cases were confirmed. This initiative was phased out as information about the supplies necessary to self-isolate was made available through community education and the Regional web site.

• COVID-19 Isolation and Recovery Program: The Region of Peel (Human Services) has been operating a voluntary self-isolation centre for individuals who are waiting for COVID-19 test results, or have tested positive, and are unable to safely self-isolate (e.g. those experiencing homelessness, precariously housed, and those for whom home isolation was deemed challenging (i.e. voluntary isolation)).

New activities:
• Expansion of the COVID-19 Isolation and Recovery Program: In December 2020, with funding assistance from the Federal Government, the Isolation and Recovery Program was expanded to include individuals who find it difficult to safely isolate at home due to financial barriers, living in precarious housing situations, or having safety concerns. This expansion allows for enhanced communication with these individuals, to determine if they need a referral to the isolation facility. Additional capacity is being explored through discussions with community agencies and leaders.

• Provide targeted support for priority populations: Support Regional partners to leverage all available funding, to continue providing supports for vulnerable individuals and for those isolating at home.

• Work with community agencies and stakeholders to identify culturally appropriate community supports and referrals to community supports (i.e. wrap around supports) for COVID-19 self-isolation.
Epidemiologic Surveillance and Reporting

Epidemiologic surveillance and reporting consists of monitoring the spread and intensity of COVID-19 in Peel Region and identifying key risk factors for COVID-19 transmission, to inform the development of protective control measures.

Assess and report on COVID-19 data, in order to describe the health of the population and identify health inequalities

Activities to date:
- Collection and reporting of required COVID-19 data elements of determinants of health such as race and occupation.
- External Reporting at: peelregion.ca/coronavirus/case-status
  - Analysis and reporting of COVID-19 cases on external dashboards
  - Analysis and reporting of long-term care home and retirement home outbreaks; school and childcare centre outbreaks, workplace outbreaks
  - Analysis and reporting of social determinants of health (race and occupation)
  - Weekly epidemiological report

New activities:
- Ongoing collection, analysis and reporting of COVID-19 data elements, to understand the underlying risk factors and determinants, which will inform new policies and interventions.
- Continued and enhanced reporting on the external COVID-19 Cases web site.

Public Health Measures

Public health measures address health gaps and disparities at an overall population level, or through targeted approaches with priority populations.

Identify and implement new or enhanced policies or interventions that protect the population from acquiring or transmitting COVID-19

Activities to date:
- Use of epidemiologic data to inform refinement or development of policy and interventions (e.g. testing sites, disease control measures, such as physical distancing and masking, and investigations and control efforts in high-risk settings).
- Advocate for supports to address underlying social determinants of health: Peel Public Health has advocated for financial support for businesses and individuals impacted by COVID-19 control measures, such as, paid sick leave, and job loss protection, rent supports and eviction protection, and community supports and services for self-isolation. These recommendations have arisen in recognition of high rates of transmission in Peel among individuals experiencing poverty and/or employed, sometimes precariously, in essential jobs that cannot be done remotely.

New activities:
- Heightened engagement and outreach with community and stakeholder groups (e.g. Peel Community Response Table) to explore the implementation of additional policies or interventions.
- Continued advocacy for supports (e.g. paid sick leave, job protection, and eviction protection) to address the underlying disparities that drive COVID-19 transmission.
- Identification of barriers to adherence of public health measures by engaging with government and community partners on things such as testing, self-isolation and recovery.
Target public health measures, to prevent COVID-19 outbreak transmission in the home and community settings

Activities to date:
• Provide support for outbreak management and infection, prevention and control (IPAC): Peel Public Health works closely with long-term care, retirement homes and congregate living facilities, schools, childcare centres and workplaces to:
  – Ensure that Ministry of Health guidelines for IPAC are being followed (e.g. hand hygiene; physical distancing; enhanced cleaning and disinfection; routine masking)
  – Provide IPAC audits and on-site visits (e.g. shelter site visits)
  – Conduct case and contact tracing, outbreak management

• Facilitate testing and surveillance:
  – Although not the mandated agency for testing, Peel Public Health facilitates testing efforts and surveillance with Ontario Health (lead agency) and Peel Paramedics.

New activities:
• Continue to identify new and emerging policies and interventions related to outbreak prevention and control for households and other community settings (e.g. long-term care and retirement homes, congregate living facilities, schools, childcare centres and workplaces).

Education, Engagement, Enforcement and Leadership

Peel Public Health works closely with government and community partners to reduce COVID-19 transmission through public education, policy consultation, enforcement, and leading advocacy for systems that will support the Region’s most vulnerable individuals.

Educate the public on strategies to reduce the risk of COVID-19 acquisition and transmission

Activities to date:
• Educate the public on COVID-19 prevention: Over the course of the pandemic, Peel Public Health developed and executed a large volume of both broad and targeted communication products to support behaviour modification and disease prevention. Many of these resources are available in multiple languages.

New activities:
• Enhance community-based education: Collaborate with community leaders to align and provide COVID-19 education from other trusted sources, in places of relevance to various communities, such as places of worship, schools, recreational facilities, and more.

Engage relevant partners and stakeholders in public education and communications, policy development, and service provision

Activities to date:
• Community engagement through consultation: Peel Public Health has consulted with community members, community agencies, and other key stakeholders in the COVID-19 response, which has informed policies and interventions designed to address the needs of priority populations.

• Supporting the work of community partners: Through collaborative forums including the Community Response Table and Integrated Response Table, Peel Public Health has engaged with community and healthcare partners, and not-for-profit agencies as they deliver critical front-line services to clients across Peel.
New activities:

- Expanded engagement with community partners and stakeholders: Increasing involvement of community partners and stakeholders in the early stages of informing and developing policies or programs, to better implement targeted interventions that account for partner insights and community context.

Ensure that the health of vulnerable populations and the general public are protected through education and enforcement

Activities to date:

- Education and Enforcement: Public health inspectors work closely with partner agencies (the province, municipal by-law and police) in order to educate and address non-compliance with the Reopening Ontario Act, 2020 and its regulations and to enforce COVID-related orders under the Health Protection and Promotion Act. This helps to ensure that Peel Public Health’s public and workplaces comply with public health guidance to protect public health.

New activities:

- Continued enforcement initiatives that provide education around public health guidance and address barriers to compliance.

- Continued partnership with Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development inspectors and other provincial Ministries and agencies to:
  - Conduct inspections of high-risk workplaces
  - Advocate for increased protection for precariously employed workers (temporary, contract, and agency workers) to support self-isolation if sick or exposed to COVID-19

Advocate for policy changes that address social determinants of health known to increase COVID-19 risk in vulnerable populations

Activities to date:

- Leadership on provincial and national roundtables: Peel Public Health has provided input and leadership at provincial and national roundtables, on discussions including epidemiologic modelling, rapid testing, mass vaccination, and socioeconomic disparities in COVID-19 transmission, among other key topics.

- Advocacy for supports to address underlying social determinants of health (as described above).

New Activities:

- Continued leadership at provincial and national roundtables.

- Continued advocacy with other partners for system supports (e.g. paid sick leave, job protection, and eviction protection).

Communication with the Public, Stakeholders and Partners

A core function of Peel Public Health’s COVID-19 response is providing timely, relevant, and accessible communications to a broad audience including the public, government and community partners, businesses, schools, long-term care homes, and more.

Provide timely access to information by using various communication channels

Activities to date:

- Broad communication mediums and channels: Peel Public Health uses a wide array of communication mediums (e.g. videos, newsletters, posters, handouts) and channels (e.g. web site and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) to share information. For key cultural celebrations, influencer videos were developed in relevant languages to encourage public health measures while celebrating.
• **Community outreach:** Peel Public Health works with community agencies to review and receive input on communication materials.

**New activities:**

• **Expanded reach of communications**
  - Evolve content of Regional web site to continue to meet the changing needs of the community and stakeholders.
  - Evaluate effectiveness of additional digital and social platforms to focus dissemination of messages.
  - Use tightly tailored approaches to reach marginalized audiences who do not have digital access.

**Provide contextual relevance of information for specific populations**

**Activities to date:**

• **Communications adapted to context:** Peel Public Health is actively working to consult with community roundtables, as well as faith-based organizations and faith leaders, to develop, adapt and communicate public health messages. Social media content is also geo-targeted to ensure that it reaches relevant audiences.

• **Communications adapted for language and sociodemographic context:** Recognizing that some Peel residents prefer to communicate in a language other than English and engage the community in different ways depending on their living context, the Region of Peel’s web site can be translated into 13 common languages. Some resource documents (e.g. what to do after being tested) and social media content regarding COVID-19 are also translated into other languages.

**New activities:**

• **Target messages for specific populations**
  - Continued translations of resources into commonly spoken languages in our Region.
  - Targeted outreach to specific groups (e.g. youth, various cultural and faith communities) and industry sectors (e.g. health care, manufacturing, trucking).
  - Further engagement of ethnocultural media channels, faith and cultural communities, noted to be influential and well-established sources of information for many Peel residents.
  - Increased engagement with community leaders and organizations to align with and assist in disseminating advice to diverse populations.

**Respond in a timely manner to public inquiries**

**Activities to date:**

• Responding to inquiries: Peel Public Health responds to inquiries from the public, community agencies and stakeholders in a timely manner.

**New activities:**

• Continue to respond in a timely way to public inquiries while prioritizing agencies that can reach into communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 transmission.