

May 19, 2021

The Hon. Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building, Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Re: Key Considerations for Re-Opening to Safeguard Hospitals and Keep Ontarians Safe

Dear Premier Ford,

On behalf of Ontario's hospitals, thank you for your efforts to protect the health and wellbeing of all Ontarians. As you said in your press conference last Thursday, the government has made some extremely hard choices to protect hospitals and reduce transmission of the virus. Our public health measures are working, but we're not out of the woods yet. ICU occupancy remains high, and variants of concern pose significant risk.

During the pandemic, our health care system, economy and citizens have suffered. At the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA), we remain very concerned about health system capacity, burnout and exhaustion among health care workers, and the growing backlog of postponed non-urgent surgeries and procedures.

As the third wave slowly eases, we are all looking forward to re-opening the province, but the speed and scope must be carefully considered. As you said last week, we simply can't rush to re-open. Ontarians must have confidence that the goal is to avoid a fourth wave and the subsequent need to re-impose province-wide restrictions, above all else.

While the progress of Ontario's vaccine rollout is very encouraging, we know that vaccines alone will not be enough to protect Ontarians and the health care system. As the government develops its plan for the path forward, we are writing to suggest key areas of consideration focused on constraining COVID-19 transmission as the province re-opens.

Like other jurisdictions, Ontario should use a staged and cautious approach that takes into account vaccination coverage, vaccine supply, disease incidence, health system capacity and, most importantly, our ability to understand the sources of disease transmission. The approach should be based on evidence and clear metrics and driven by the continued need to ensure that any ongoing transmission is limited. It should consider equitable access to services and opportunities for marginalized populations, and – as appropriate – distinguish between the gradual re-opening of the health care system and that of the broader economy.

Key Considerations for Re-Opening

An effective re-opening strategy requires adequate public health resourcing and must emphasize high vaccination coverage, adherence to public health measures, sufficient hospital capacity and effective case and contact management at both the regional and provincial levels. Maintaining high testing rates and quickly identifying contacts to prevent outbreaks will remain crucial.

The plan should consider the percentage of COVID-19 cases where the source of transmission is known at the time of reporting. Areas within Canada that have good disease control, including some in Ontario, are already monitoring this indicator and know the source of transmission in the majority of individuals when they test positive.

Other indicators such as vaccination coverage, the 7-day average of new cases per 100,000 people, and percent positivity are also important. However, as these indicators improve, it becomes easier to understand the sources of transmission, and the percentage of cases where the source of transmission is known at the time of reporting will increase.

Staged Approach to Constrain Transmission

Ontario's hospitals understand the risks and harms to children and youth caused by school closures, as highlighted by paediatric hospitals and children's organizations. They should be the first to open and the last to close, supported by a scientific and evidence-based approach to policy decisions.

As the province further re-opens, some regions may be able to do so earlier than others, especially if the sources of disease transmission in their communities are known. Within each community, low-transmission environments should open first. A staged approach to re-opening should contemplate:

- **Low-transmission environments opening first.** The province will need to use evidence about how other jurisdictions have lifted restrictions on such settings, and those impacts and outcomes. There should also be close consideration of the order restrictions will be lifted and any possible negative consequences. A staged approach to opening might be:
 1. Uncrowded outdoor environments (e.g., parks, golf courses, playgrounds, tennis courts)
 2. Crowded outdoor environments (e.g., patio dining) and uncrowded, well-ventilated indoor environments (e.g., retail)
 3. Crowded indoor environments (e.g., restaurants, gyms)
- **Continuing with current travel restrictions.** In consultation with the federal government, in-country restrictions could eventually be eased.
- **Progress of the vaccine rollout.** In addition to the vaccine rollout plan, the province should contemplate setting vaccination targets in specific high-risk communities.
- **Hospital capacity pressures.** As the province re-opens, health system capacity must be monitored. Specific indicators to watch include the decline in total hospitalizations (3-day avg.) over 14 days; decline in 3-day avg. number of deaths over 14 days; new hospitalizations per 100,000 residents, rate of ICU admissions over 3-day avg., and the percentage of total and ICU beds available.

By examining these areas in consultation with health and scientific experts and clearly communicating evidence-based decisions, Ontario can increase the probability that re-opening is safe and successful. This approach would protect vulnerable populations and public health and health system capacity and mitigate the risk of a fourth wave causing even more damage to the health system and economy.

Premier, thank you for your consideration and your ongoing commitment to supporting Ontario's hospitals. Please do not hesitate to reach out if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,



Sarah Downey
Board Chair



Anthony Dale
President and CEO

CC: The Hon. Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
The Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy, Minister of Finance and President of the Treasury Board
Ontario Hospital CEOs
Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Helen Angus, Deputy Minister of Health
Matthew Anderson, President and CEO, Ontario Health
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