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TO: Board of Health for the City of Ottawa Health Unit

DESTINATAIRE : Conseil de santé de la circonscription sanitaire de la ville d'Ottawa

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DATE: April 11, 2022

11 avril 2022

FILE NUMBER: ACS2022-OPH-HIS-0001

SUBJECT: UPDATE ON THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CONGREGATE LIVING
SETTINGS IN OTTAWA

OBJET : MISE À JOUR SUR LES IMPACTS DU COVID-19 SUR LES LIEUX
D'HÉBERGEMENT COLLECTIF À OTTAWA

PURPOSE

The purpose of this memorandum is to update the Board of Health on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents of congregate living settings in Ottawa and to highlight Ottawa Public Health's (OPH) work to mitigate these impacts.

BACKGROUND

The term congregate living settings (CLSs) describes a wide range of facilities where groups of people live together with shared spaces. Examples include, but are not limited to, community shelters, group homes, supportive living residences, residential treatment centres and correctional facilities. These settings are more vulnerable to outbreaks of COVID-19 due to factors such as crowding, shared amenities and communal dining. Moreover, while the individuals living in these settings vary widely, many experience physical, mental, cognitive, or behavioural barriers that can increase their risk of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases.

OPH previously highlighted the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents and staff of congregate living settings during the early waves of the pandemic in its report, [Outbreaks of COVID-19 in Congregate Settings](#) (the Congregate Settings Report), released in December 2021. The period covered in the report was March 2020 to July 2021. Since then, the emergence of the Omicron variant led to an unprecedented surge in cases and outbreaks in these settings between December 2021 and January 2022. In January 2022 alone there were 77 new confirmed outbreaks of COVID-19 in CLSs. This is significant considering that there were 104 confirmed COVID-19 outbreaks in CLSs in all of 2021 and just 51 in 2020 (see Appendix 1: Figure 1 and Table 2).

The Government of Ontario announced a phased easing of public health restrictions beginning in March 2022, with the removal of all public health restrictions, including masking in high-risk congregate living settings by April 27, 2022. Following this announcement, the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table (the Science Table) released [updated projections on March 17, 2022](#), predicting an increase in COVID-19 cases over the coming weeks following removal of provincial public health restrictions. Re-emergence of other seasonal respiratory and enteric viruses (e.g. influenza, RSV) is also likely in fall 2022¹. Older adults, marginalized individuals and groups and those who are unvaccinated or immunocompromised remain susceptible to severe illness from COVID-19 and other infections². While it did not extend projections past May 2022, the Science Table advised that Ontario remains vulnerable as long as the pandemic continues, noting that how the pandemic will play out in future depends on the vulnerability of the population as well as the severity of future COVID-19 variants. The Science Table recommended actions that individuals can take to protect themselves

and others, including: ensuring they have a complete vaccine series (three doses in adults, four in eligible high-risk groups); using high-quality masks whenever necessary; and staying home when sick or symptomatic³.

The Science Table also advised that Ontario must maintain readiness to implement COVID-19 control measures, including mass COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, vaccine certificates requiring a recent booster dose for high-risk settings, mask mandates, and appropriate protective measures in congregate care settings⁴.

Planning is underway to help mitigate the impact of future potential surges in COVID-19 on CLS residents, building on lessons learned during the first waves of the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

With 487 resident cases and 458 staff cases in CLSs during the December 2021-January 2022 COVID-19 surge, heavy staffing pressures were felt throughout the sector as many staff were ill and others isolating as close contacts of positive cases, leaving many facilities straining to maintain operations. CLS operators reported difficulties finding replacement staff and lack of time to train new recruits, many of whom were hired from non-CLS sectors due to staffing shortages, and lacked familiarity with infection prevention and control measures.

New provincial guidance on the management of cases and contacts of COVID-19, released in January 2022, required CLSs to quickly adapt their approach from previous guidance released in November 2021. Regular communications with partners, including the City of Ottawa's Human Needs Command Centre (HNCC), the City of Ottawa's Community and Social Services Department, Ottawa Inner City Health (OICH), the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), and the Congregate Living Working Group, allowed OPH to help partners navigate provincial guidance and find solutions to challenges as they arose. To support CLS operators, OPH hosted a community of practice for CLS partners in January 2022 to review the latest guidance and best practices and to provide an opportunity to ask questions and learn in an open forum.

With respect to the community shelter system specifically, the HNCC's enhanced support, provided by isolation centres, respite and physical distancing centres (PDC), were needed and fully utilized. The Routhier Isolation Centre's 20 beds were quickly filled by the end of December and cases and contacts had to isolate in place at community shelters, potentially exposing others to COVID-19 and leading to further spread of illness. Lack of space and crowding in community shelters, all of which were

operating at or near capacity, made isolation of cases and contacts difficult. Severe cold weather in January further strained the system, with more clients seeking shelter. Temporary PDCs, including the Nicholas PDC for men, the Dempsey PDC for women and the Tom Brown Arena, provided crucial overflow space, allowing community shelters to protect clients by maintaining important infection prevention and control measures, including cohorting and physical distancing.

As evidence emerged that two doses of COVID-19 vaccine were less effective at preventing breakthrough infection of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, OPH worked with partners (i.e., Ottawa Inner City Health) to increase third dose vaccination of residents and staff in CLSs. OPH provided over 80 on-site third-dose clinics in CLSs throughout the city between October 2021 and February 2022. Evidence has confirmed that three doses of COVID-19 vaccine offer strong protection against severe illness and death related to COVID-19. One person died due to COVID-19 in a CLS during the December-January surge.

Notwithstanding ongoing education efforts and clinics, vaccination rates in community shelters have fluctuated. This is partly due to client transiency, leading to constant shifts in the proportion of vaccinated clients as they move in and out of the system. New clients continue to arrive, requiring first or second COVID-19 vaccine doses. Another contributing factor is the prevalence of mental health concerns and substance use among community shelter clients who may have had challenges with the health care system in the past. OPH continues to work with partners to build trust among clients through a consistent approach to infection prevention and control, with a focus on ensuring that clients can access the supports they need. Ongoing vaccination efforts are needed and underway in shelters to continuously increase vaccine protection in this population.

With the lifting of provincial public health restrictions and anticipated future waves of COVID-19 over the coming months, OPH is working with partners to plan strategies to mitigate future risks. Based on lessons learned during the pandemic, partners' key areas of focus include:

- Contingency planning for ongoing staffing pressures
- Education to improve knowledge of infection prevention and control practices
- Ensuring key supports remain in place, including physical distancing centres
- Promoting COVID-19 vaccination in CLSs

- Addressing the end of provincial public health mandates in congregate settings by implementing employer-driven requirements across the sector

Of particular importance will be the continued availability of the physical distancing centres to address ongoing capacity issues in community shelters to support public health guidelines and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In its report to the Community and Protective Services Committee on March 31, 2022, rising to Council on April 13, 2022, City of Ottawa's Community and Social Services Department requested that the Chief Financial Officer / City Treasure be provided the delegated authority to draw on the Tax Stabilization Reserve to fund any shortfalls not covered by the anticipated additional funding from the Social Services Relief Fund or other mitigation strategies to cover the cover the cost of services, including Physical Distancing Centres and Respite Centres, until December 31, 2022⁵.

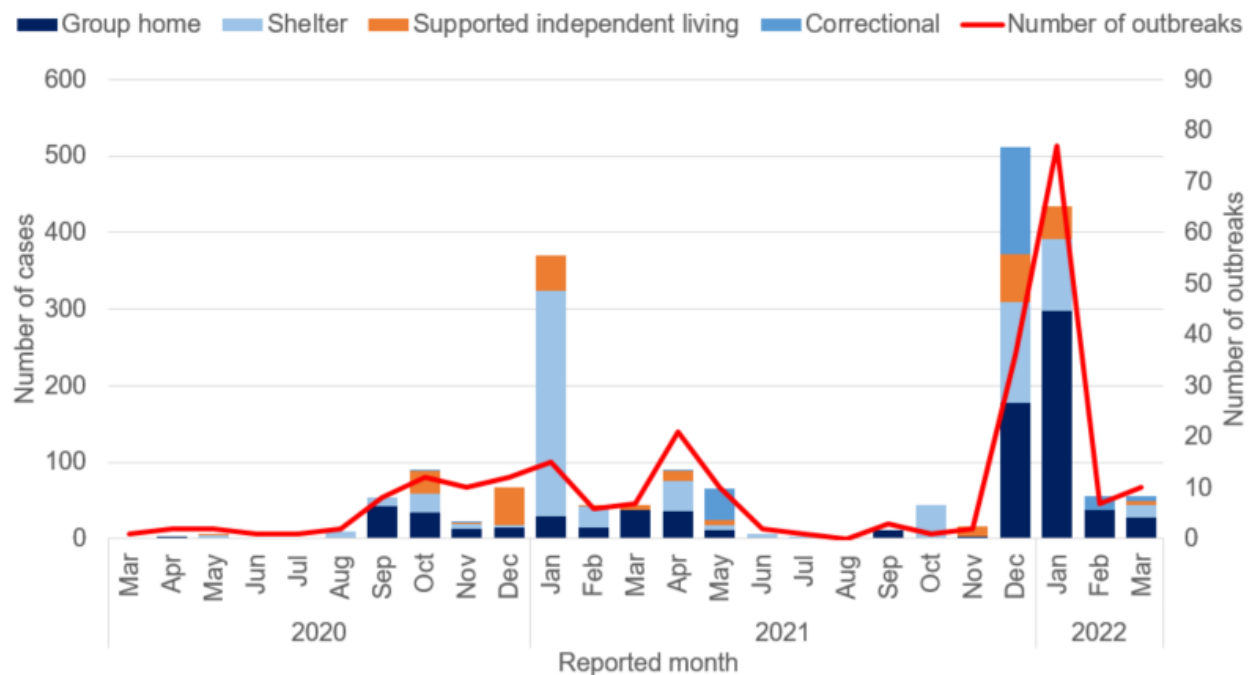
NEXT STEPS

OPH will initiate partner and stakeholder consultations and planning for future surges in outbreaks of COVID-19 in congregate living settings in Q2 of 2022. OPH will continue to work with partners to improve interagency response to outbreak management.

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APPENDIX 1: TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1: Cases and Confirmed Outbreaks of COVID-19 in Congregate Living Settings in Ottawa, Mar 2020 to Mar 2022



Data on cases and outbreaks are from CCM as of 3:00 p.m. on March 27, 2022. Group homes include hospices and rooming homes.

Table 2: Summary of Indicators for Confirmed COVID-19 Outbreaks in Congregate Living Settings, March 2020 through March 27, 2022

Indicator	Total	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Q2 2021	Q3 2021	Q4 2021	Q1 2022
Number of outbreaks	249	1	5	11	34	28	33	4	39	94
Mean duration (days)	19	9	14	25	19	23	19	16	23	15
Number of resident cases	1163	0	7	30	96	305	99	10	335	281
Number of staff cases	847	1	5	35	85	154	63	4	237	263
Number of resident deaths	12	0	0	0	6	3	0	1	1	1
Number of staff deaths	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Data extracted from CCM as of 3:00 p.m. on March 27, 2022. Eight (8) outbreaks from Q1 2022 were open at the time of extraction and are excluded from the calculation of mean duration.

¹ P. M. Lavoie, F. Reicherz, A. Solimano and J. M. Langley, "Potential resurgence of respiratory syncytial," *CMAJ*, vol. 193, no. 29, pp. E1140-1, 2021. <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/193/29/E1140>

² https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Update-on-COVID-19-Projections_2022.03.17_English-1.pdf

³ https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Update-on-COVID-19-Projections_2022.03.17_English-1.pdf

⁴ https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Update-on-COVID-19-Projections_2022.03.17_English-1.pdf

⁵ Human Needs Command Centre, "[Respite Services Sustainability Plan](#)," Ottawa, 2022.