

Eight more residents lost to Virus as Province prepares for Monday re-opening

As the Province prepares to lift many restrictions stemming from a return to a modified Step 2 on Monday, the community has seen seven residents lost to the latest COVID-19 outbreak at Chartwell Aurora.

Over the course of the last week, York Region Public Health has reported the deaths of eight residents due to COVID-19, seven of whom resided at Chartwell Aurora (formerly Resthaven), located near George Street and Wellington, and range in age from 65 to 96.

On January 11, a 92-year-old asymptomatic female lost the battle with COVID-19 after receiving a positive test result on January 6. On the same day, a 90-year-old male, also asymptomatic and testing positive on the same day, lost the fight.

A further death was reported on January 13, this time a 90-year-old male, asymptomatic, who tested positive on December 28.

An 86-year-old woman, who tested positive and experienced her first symptoms on January 6, died on January 15 and, the following day, an asymptomatic 96-year-old female who tested positive in New Year's Eve, succumbed to the virus.

A further loss at Chartwell Aurora was reported January 20, this time a 65-year-old female who first tested positive on January 11 before exhibiting her first symptoms two days later. She lost her fight on January 18.

Chartwell's highest priority is the safety and well-being of our residents, and we are grateful to our staff, residents and family members who continue to take important steps to protect themselves and each other to help stop the spread of this virus, said Sharon Ranalli, VP Marketing and Communications, for Chartwell Retirement Residences. The current Omicron variant has necessitated heightened efforts from our residence teams to provide extra infection-control vigilance, support and public health compliance in response to the highly transmissible nature of this variant.

Despite these efforts, Chartwell Aurora Long Term Care has been fighting an outbreak since December 30, 2021. Sadly, eight COVID-positive residents have passed away during this outbreak. We respect the privacy of these individuals and extend our sympathies to their family and friends.

We know this is also very difficult on our staff and the Chartwell Aurora family community. We continue to encourage vaccination as one of the most important steps in fighting this disease and are grateful to our residents and staff for their high levels of vaccination including third doses. We are currently coordinating consent for a resident fourth dose to be ready for that next step.

Outside of Chartwell Aurora, a 78-year-old male, who first tested positive on January 12, the same day he first experienced symptoms, died the following day at Southlake Regional Health Centre. York Region Public Health stated his exposure was due to local transmission.

Despite this spate of deaths, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Barry Pakes, pointed to some positive signs on Monday in his weekly COVID update.

The Omicron variant has now been dominant in Ontario and York Region for over a month. It has dramatically changed everything we knew and how we respond to the pandemic, as well as raised many unknowns, said Dr. Pakes. Fortunately, thanks to the work of York Region Public Health staff and global scientists, we now have some very positive news to share.

First, several studies in the U.S. and the United Kingdom last week have made it clear how important the third dose booster of the vaccine is. These studies show that while two doses of vaccine provided 45 to 65 per cent protection against hospitalization, the booster dose protected almost 90 per cent. Since hospitalization and health system capacity are the most significant challenges of the Omicron surge, it has never been more important to get your third dose for your own protection and to contribute to a speedy

reopening. We look forward to data from across Ontario and our own York Region data to confirm these findings in the coming days.?

At the same time, Dr. Pakes said there are signs that cases in York Region and Ontario-wide are showing signs of stabilization and ?may be beginning to decrease.?

While actual case numbers are not a useful metric since the testing guidance changed several weeks ago, the test positivity rate as well as our wastewater signal are both stabilizing and may be moving in a positive direction. These very tentative but hopeful indications are the reason the Province has announced plans to gradually ease the modified Step 2 restrictions we are currently in.?

As of January 31, many businesses, including restaurants and gyms, will be able to re-open at 50 per cent capacity. Capacity limits will be reviewed and adjusted with further easing of restrictions planned for February 21 if things continue to move in a positive direction.

?While this is positive news, hospital admissions remain very high and ICU occupancy continues to increase slowly,? said Dr. Pakes. ?Unfortunately, we are seeing many deaths. We must remain cautious and vigilant to help decrease the surge of omicron. Even when restrictions are slightly lifted, please know this variant is highly transmissible. Observing the continuing restrictions has a direct impact on our hospitalization and ICU admissions. It is very important to protect the most vulnerable in the community and preserve our healthcare symptoms. If you have symptoms, remain at home. Assume you are positive and notify your close contacts right away.?

Vaccinations will also be key in the continuation of in-person learning, he added.

While in-person learning has positive impacts on a students' social, physical and mental health wellbeing, Dr. Pakes admitted it will ?take some time for parents and students to get used to the new normal? in schools and ?it is understandable to still have some concerns.

?Cases will no longer be reported in schools and cohorts will no longer be dismissed,? he said. ?However, vaccine coverage continues to increase. Rapid tests have been distributed for use in symptomatic children and other safety measures remain in place that will help limit the spread of COVID-19 in schools.?

LOCAL STATS

As of Monday, January 25, Aurora was grappling with 72 confirmed active cases of COVID-19, but, as York Region Public Health notes, this number is an under-estimate.

?With rapid transmission of Omicron and recent provincial changes in testing eligibility and case management, case counts and outbreaks reported through the COVID-19 in York Region interactive dashboard are an under-estimate of the true number of individuals with COVID-19 and outbreaks in York Region,? the Region stated at the start of January, adding case counts should be treated with caution. ?Public Health units across Ontario are prioritizing case management of high-risk individuals and settings. Workplace outbreaks are no longer reported.?

The Region is no longer reporting source of exposure for active cases.

Since the start of the global pandemic, York Region Public Health had been able to confirm 3,985 cumulative cases of COVID-19 in Aurora as of January 24. 3,855 cases are now marked as resolved and there have been 58 fatalities attributed to the virus.

88.3 per cent of Aurora residents aged 5 and up have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 84.2 per cent had received two doses by the start of the week.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter