

New Year sees Ontario return to Step Two in Roadmap to Reopen

Ontario is beginning the New Year with a temporary return to Step 2 of the Province's Roadmap to Reopening Plan amid a continued surge of new cases of COVID-19 spurred by the Omicron variant.

The shift back to a modified Step 2, effective Wednesday, January 5, was announced by Premier Doug Ford on Monday. It will be in place for a minimum of 21 days ? January 26.

Students will be back to remote learning until at least January 17, ?subject to trends in public health and health system indicators.?

Step 2 will see restaurants once again unable to host indoor dining, with options limited to take-out and delivery; a closure of gyms and other indoor sports and recreation facilities; and further limits on gatherings to five people indoors and 10 people outdoors.

Businesses and organizations will be required to have their employees work remotely ?unless the nature of their work requires them to be on-site?, while retail settings, including shopping malls, will be set at a 50 per cent capacity limit. This capacity limit will also impact public libraries and personal care services.

Capacity limits at indoor weddings, funerals, religious services, rites and ceremonies will be pegged at 50 per cent capacity of the host room. Outdoor services are limited to the number of people that can maintain two metres of physical distance.

Indoor concert venues, theatres, cinemas, museums, galleries, zoos, historic sites, amusement parks and more are also required to close, with outdoor amenities limited to 50 per cent capacity.

Also effective January 5, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health will require hospitals and regulated health professionals to pause all non-urgent surgeries and procedures in order to ?preserve critical care and human resource capacity.

?As we continue with our provincial vaccine booster efforts, we must look at every option to slow the spread of the highly-contagious Omicron variant,? said Premier Ford. ?Putting these targeted and time-tested measures in place will give us more opportunity to deliver vaccines to all Ontarians and ensure everyone has maximum protection against this virus.?

While ?evolving data? has shown Omicron is generally less severe than Delta, according to the Province, Ontario is seeing a larger number of hospital admissions ?relative to ICU admissions.?

?Real-world experience and evidence in Ontario reveal that approximately one per cent of Omicron cases require hospital care,? said the Province. ?The rapid rise of Omicron cases, which may soon number in the hundreds of thousands, could result in the Province's hospital capacity becoming overwhelmed if further action isn't taken to curb transmission.

?When one in 100 cases goes to hospital, it means that with this rapid increase in transmission the number of new cases requiring hospitalization will also rapidly increase daily.?

At the local level, York Region's Medical Officer of Health Dr. Barry Pakes said despite the grim news ?we can take comfort knowing we enter 2022 with much more knowledge about COVID-19 than we did at the start of 2021? ? but the numbers are still concerning.

?In York Region, at the end of last week, we were reporting over 8,000 known cases of COVID-10, and this is likely only one-fifth of the cases currently circulating in our communities,? he said, noting the reality might be closer to 60,000 unreported cases. ?These numbers align with what our modelling predicted and we continue to expect an increase in cases in the coming weeks.?

While Dr. Pakes said York Region Public Health agrees with the Province's decisions, Mayor Tom Mrakas said the decision to shut

down businesses and move schools back to remote learning was truly frustrating and disappointing.

Unfortunately, we can't change the decision, but what we can do is support each other while we continue to follow the guidelines of public health," said the Mayor in a statement. "As we have demonstrated throughout this crisis, we as a community need to, once again, pull together to support our local businesses. So, please, wherever possible, visit our local businesses and make a purchase. They all need us now.

We must also take care of ourselves. If you are able, get outside and stay active! Go for a walk with your families and enjoy the time together. For those of you who want to skate, we are working hard to get the outdoor rinks up ASAP. Staff will be reviewing the regulations and the impact they have to all our programs and services and will provide updated info as soon as possible.

Let's all do what we can to ensure our children, our families, our businesses, our community can withstand the impacts of these restrictions.

SUPPORT FOR BUSINESSES

As businesses are again forced to clamp down on their capacity limits, the Province announced upcoming supports.

In recognition of the impact the Omicron variant and additional public health measures have on small businesses, the government is expanding the new Ontario Business Costs Rebate program," said the Province on Monday. "Eligible businesses that are required to close or reduce capacity will receive rebate payments for a portion of the property tax and energy costs that they incur while subject to these measures. Eligible businesses required to reduce capacity to 50 per cent, such as smaller retail stores, will receive a rebate payment equivalent to 50 per cent of their costs, while businesses required to close for indoor activities, such as restaurants and gyms, will receive a rebate payment equivalent to 100 per cent of their costs.

A full list of eligible business types will be made available in the coming weeks.

To improve cash flows for Ontario businesses, effective January 1, 2022, the government is also providing up to \$7.5 billion for six-month interest- and penalty-free period for Ontario businesses to make payments for most provincially-administered taxes, supporting businesses now, and providing the flexibility they will need for long-term planning.

The government is also exploring options for providing further targeted and necessary supports for businesses and workers impacted by the Province's move into a modified Step Two of the Roadmap to Reopen, including grants.

LOCAL STATS

As of Tuesday, January 4, York Region Public Health reported 406 active cases of COVID-19 in the Aurora community.

To date, the community has seen 3,203 confirmed cases of the virus, 2,749 of which are now marked as recovered. 48 deaths have been attributed to the virus.

400 of the active cases are attributed to local transmission, close contact, or unknown exposure, while 6 are attributed to institutional outbreak.

At the start of the week, 91.1 per cent of residents aged 12 and up have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while the number of residents with two doses stands at 89.6 per cent.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter