

Stay-at-Home orders extended as Province walks back some restrictions

Stay-at-Home orders across Ontario have been extended for a further two weeks amid a significant surge in COVID-19 cases, including nearly 180 active cases in Aurora alone by April 20.

The Province announced the extension of the orders, for a total of six weeks, on Friday afternoon following consultation with Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health.

“As the latest modelling confirms, without taking immediate and decisive action, COVID-19 cases will spiral out of control and our hospitals will be overwhelmed,” said Premier Doug Ford in a statement. “That is why we are making difficult, but necessary decisions to reduce mobility and keep people in the safety of their own homes. We need to contain the spread of this deadly virus while getting vaccines into as many arms as quickly as possible.”

Among the raft of new restrictions that came into effect just after midnight on Saturday, April 17, were the prohibition of all outdoor social gatherings and organized public events, except those with members of the same household or one other person from outside that household who lives alone or is a caregiver for any member of that household; the closure of all non-essential workplaces in the construction centre; and the closure of “all outdoor recreational amenities such as golf courses, basketball courts, soccer fields and playgrounds with limited exceptions.”

Additionally, effective Monday, April 19, the capacity limits of weddings, funerals and religious services, rites and ceremonies were limited to 10 people indoors and outdoors.

But the measures to limit the use of some outdoor recreational facilities, particularly playgrounds, sparked backlash over the weekend which quickly saw the government backpedal on that provision.

“Ontario's enhanced restrictions were always intended to stop large gatherings where spread can happen,” said the Premier on social media. “Our regulations will be amended to allow playgrounds, but gatherings outside will still be enforced. Play outside safely. Parents, keep your distance and wear masks if you can't.”

Also at the receiving end of backlash from the public were some new powers handed over to Police to ensure residents stayed at home and avoided unnecessary travel.

The Province gave Police the authority to “require any individual to provide their home address and purpose of not being at their residence.”

“In addition, police officers, special constables, and First Nation Constables will have the authority to stop vehicles to inquire about an individual's reasons for leaving their homes,” said the Province. “The additional enforcement tool will only be in effect during the stay-at-home order and exclusively to enforce the stay-at-home order.”

Added Solicitor General Sylvia Jones: “With our hospital system under significant pressure and the continued increase of COVID-19 variants, we are stepping up enforcement to ensure that people adhere to the stay-at-home order and follow public health measures. This is a critical moment in Ontario's response to this deadly virus; that is why we are doing whatever it takes to stop the spread and protect our families.”

But reaction was swift, prompting a statement from the York Regional Police the following day stating they would not be using the powers granted to them by the Government.

“Having now had the opportunity to review the Provincial order, York Regional Police will be taking a balanced approach to enforcement, applying the order equitably and legally to ensure we continue to support public health measures while maintaining

public trust," said York Regional Police Chief Jim MacSween. "We will not be conducting random vehicle or individual stops. Enforcement will continue to be complaint-driven and proactive with the goal of gaining compliance. Our actions will focus on those individuals who overtly put others in danger and citizens refusing to comply will be charged appropriately.

"Our enforcement efforts will continue as they have since the beginning of the pandemic, focused on the 4Es: Engage (with the individual), Explain (why we are there), Educate (on the rules and regulations), and Enforce (as a last resort). York Regional Police will continue to support York Region Public Health and Regional and Municipal Offices to ensure the safety of our members and the safety of the community."

In a statement issued Saturday, Mayor Tom Mrakas recognized the mixed reaction that new and proposed measures received, but urged unity through the balance of the Stay-at-Home order.

"The next five weeks will be a struggle for many residents, both physically and mentally," he said. "For those that need someone to talk to, please, please, please seek the support you need. For businesses that are hanging on by a thread, we know your livelihood has been threatened and the supports are not enough to keep you going, we will continue to push hard for additional support and to ensure the supports which are in place can be accessed by all businesses."

AURORA STATISTICS

As of Tuesday, April 20, Aurora has seen a total of 1,460 onfirmed cases of COVID-19 since the start of the global pandemic, 178 of which remain active. 1,240 cases are now marked as resolved and there have been 42 fatalities.

Of the 178 active cases, 165 are related to local transmission and close contact, 8 to institutional outbreak, and 5 related to workplace.

370 cases related to variants of concern have been identified, 344 of which are of an undetermined lineage.

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