

We're staring down the barrel of another lockdown: Premier

Ontario is staring down the barrel of another lockdown and further restrictions to battle this second wave of COVID-19 could be coming in order to fatten the curve, according to Premier Doug Ford.

These were the words delivered to Ontarians on Friday afternoon as the Government announced York Region would join other jurisdictions into the Red (Control) Zone in response to rising cases of the virus.

York Region entered the Red (Control) zone of the Province's new COVID-19 framework at 12.01 a.m. on Monday morning. As such, individuals living in these areas are encouraged to work from home, avoid visiting other households and limit trips outside the home wherever possible.

These essential trips include getting to work and school, getting groceries, keeping medical appointments, and exercising.

Additionally, under the Red (Control) measures, gatherings for all organized social and organized public events are now limited to 10 people indoors and 25 people outdoors; face coverings are required in all indoor public spaces and workspaces with few exceptions; and religious services, including weddings and funerals, are limited to 30 per cent capacity indoors and 100 people outdoors.

Restaurants and bars now have a maximum number of patrons permitted to be seated indoors at 10 (a limit of four per table) with a minimum of two metres between tables, and such premises will have to close by 10 p.m.

Based on current projections, intensive care units could be overwhelmed in six weeks, said the Premier in Friday's update. The impact on our hospitals would be absolutely devastating. As Premier, I can't accept that and I won't accept that. We must do whatever it takes to slow the spread of this virus. We must do whatever it takes to stop our hospitals from being overrun. So, we're here today to take action. We're here today to protect the health of Ontarians.

The updated COVID-19 framework sets new thresholds and offers new guidelines for people in Red (Control) Zones like York Region. In addition to limiting trips at home with exceptions for the above-mentioned essentials, further measures could be introduced next week, the Premier noted.

I know this will be difficult, he continued. You have already sacrificed so much, but we need to be clear about what is at stake: We're staring down the barrel of another lockdown and I will not hesitate for a second if we have to go further because our number-one priority now is getting these numbers down. But here's the good news: we can change the course, we can bend the curve and get this virus under control.

Each of us have a role to play. Every one of us has a role to play in preventing a lockdown. We need to continue following public health advice, we can't become complacent. We need to fight and continue fighting. Please don't lose hope. Never in our lifetimes, in a generation, has so much depended on our collective action. Never has so much depended on us coming together as a people, as a Province. Together, we can and we will get through this.

Joining the Premier at Friday's announcement was Deputy Premier, Health Minister and Newmarket-Aurora MPP Christine Elliott. This, she said, is a crucial time in fighting the pandemic.

Cases continue to rise around the world and here at home, she said. We have seen cases increase 45 per cent week over week. Positivity rates are increasing dramatically across the Province. We have now hit 4.4 per cent, compared to 3.2 per cent last week with concerning increases in hotspots. Outbreaks are also increasing in more regions, across more types of organizations. Over the past seven days alone, our Province has seen 71 deaths in long-term care homes.

As the COVID-19 epidemic continues to evolve, our government's response must evolve with it. Today, it is clear we need to take action to stop the further spread of COVID-19 to keep our schools open, to maintain health system capacity, and to protect our most vulnerable. That is why in consultation with the Chief Medical Officer of Health and the Public Health Measures table, our government is taking immediate action to reduce the risk and protect the health and wellbeing of Ontarians.

The revised framework came just a day after alarming projections were released by the Province. Modelling indicated that if no further measures were taken Ontario could see more than 6,000 new cases of COVID-19 per day by the middle of next month.

We are at a very critical time in our Province, said Dr. Dave Williams, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. We know how difficult these past few months have been for everyone, but we need to get these numbers down to protect the health and safety of Ontarians and to protect our healthcare system from being overwhelmed. This challenge before us will be difficult but it is not impossible to overcome. We flattened the curve before and we can do it again. It will take all of us to do our part.

Throughout this pandemic, Ontarians have demonstrated their willingness to follow public health measures, to keep their loved ones and community safe. I know you're getting tired. I know you want to see your friends and family and gather together like you used to. After months of dealing with COVID-19, this is completely understandable but these gatherings have meant that people are having too much contact with each other and this contact has resulted in COVID-19 cases.

Several of our Public Health Units are managing cases of COVID-19 related to large Halloween parties and others are following up on cases because of wedding celebrations where proper masking and physical distancing practices were not followed. These interactions have had an impact on the health and safety of our loved ones, on the community and on our most vulnerable. It takes all of us together to stop the spread of COVID-19. Everyone has a role to play.

From a Regional perspective, the Province's announcement was a stark reminder that the virus is a persistent threat, said York Region Chair Wayne Emmerson and Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Chief Medical Officer of Health, in a joint statement on Friday afternoon.

Throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic York Region has remained committed to protecting the health and safety of all residents while taking prudent measures to stop the spread of this virus, they said. Now, more than ever, we must continue working together to keep our families and our communities safe. It is vital we follow public health measures, including staying home as much as possible, especially when feeling ill, maintaining physical distancing, washing your hands frequently with soap and water, limiting gatherings to those in your immediate household and wearing a face mask or covering when physical distancing is not possible.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter