

Ontario enters province-wide lockdown starting Dec. 26

Written By PAULA BROWN

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Ontario will be entering another province-wide lockdown come Boxing Day, as numbers of COVID-19 cases continue to rise daily and the Province looks to prevent inundating hospitals and intensive care units (ICU) with sick patients.

"This difficult action is without a doubt necessary to save lives and prevent our hospitals from being overwhelmed in the coming weeks. Make no mistake, thousands of lives are at stake right now," said Premier Doug Ford. "If we fail to take action now the consequences could be catastrophic."

The announcement of the lockdown was made by Ford during a press conference on Monday (Dec. 21). The lockdown will take effect on Dec. 26 (Boxing Day) and will remain in place until Jan. 23, 2021 for health units in southern Ontario. Regions in northern Ontario, where numbers of COVID-19 are significantly lower, lockdown ends on Jan. 9, 2021.

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) has reported a total of 2,149 cases of COVID-19 in the region since the start of the pandemic, and on Monday reported 133 new cases. At the time of the lockdown announcement WDGPH reported 315 active cases in the region, including 152 in Guelph, 59 in Dufferin County and 44 in Wellington County.

In the announcement, Ford shared details on the spread of the virus for higher outbreak areas to areas with fewer cases.

Prior to the lockdown decision the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) was calling on the Province to move all regions with "Red" zones of the COVID-19 framework to move to "Grey" or a lockdown. The recommendation from the OHA was to have areas with an infection rate of 40 per 100,000 to go into a four-week lockdown.

"Our hospitals are filling up more each day," said Ford. "We have seen a 70 percent increase in hospitalisations and 80 percent increase in ICU admission in the past few weeks."

Health Minister Christine Elliott said despite the investment of 2,000 new beds in 57 of Ontario's hospitals, more work needs to be done.

"The situation in our hospitals is a reflection of the spread of COVID-19 in our communities," said Elliott. "Urgent and immediate action must be taken to prevent our healthcare system from becoming overwhelmed."

Ford spoke directly to those living in "yellow" and "green" zones in Ontario, noting the risk of inter-provincial travel and the spread.

During the announcement Ford also expressed concerns for the number of travellers going through Pearson Airport and across borders, with the new, more contagious strain of COVID-19 found in the U.K.

"This is an extremely serious threat," said Ford, later adding that the borders are like spaghetti drainers. "They aren't getting checked."

With the province-wide lockdown, Ontario schools will be shut down, although Ford said the schools are "not part of the problem of COVID in our communities."

Before students left school for the holiday break the Ministry of Education provided a memo encouraging boards to have staff and

students take their materials home.

Heather Looney told the Free Press that the Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) had advised staff to take devices and materials home over the winter break, a practice she added was not uncommon.

Students from Kindergarten to Grade 8 will return to remote learning on Jan. 4 and to in-person learning on Jan. 11, while high school students will return to remote learning on Jan. 4 and will return to the classroom on Jan. 25.

When asked about holding off on the shutdown of the Province, Ford said it was to given business times to prepare.

?We want to give the same opportunities to businesses that haven't experience a lockdown before and there is a tremendous amount of them across the province,? said Ford. ?Give them the opportunity to get ready and get ready to hunker down. We can't do it overnight and leave these people with inventory.?

With the lockdown essential businesses such as grocery stores and pharmacies will remain open with reduced capacity and other retailers will be open for curbside pickup and delivery. Ontarians are being asked to stay home and only leave if necessary, including work, groceries, prescriptions, and medical appointments.

The province-wide lockdown will remain for 14 days for regions in northern Ontario, while regions in southern Ontario will have a 28-day lockdown.