

Dufferin marks one year anniversary of COVID-19 pandemic

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It was a week of grim milestones.

Dufferin County, alongside the world, marked one year since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic. The community, on Tuesday (March 16) also marked the one year anniversary of the regions first positive case of the novel virus.

"It's been a difficult year for our community, for every community essentially," said Dufferin County Warden Darren White. "A year ago, when we started this, I don't think any of us would have realized what was about to come."

What came for many was a year of isolation from friends and loved ones, the loss of work, the loss of learning in school, and ongoing uncertainty.

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health confirmed the first case of COVID-19 on March 16, 2020. A male in his 40s, returning from Atlanta, Georgia had been tested at Headwaters Health Care in Orangeville.

"It was scary to realize that something that the entire planet was quickly becoming concerned about was in our community," recalls White. "We knew it was coming, it was a matter of time, but you're never really prepared to hear that it's here, and it's now."

Since the start of the pandemic there have been 105 deaths related to COVID-19 in the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph region, 33 of those deaths have been in Dufferin County.

"The 33 people in the County that didn't survive, those losses will continue to be felt by those families, by the community in general and certainly our senior management team and myself," said White.

"I carry those 33 deaths on my shoulders, they sit with me every day, that I was Warden when this happened."

In early April, an outbreak was declared at Headwaters Hospital as 13 hospital staff tested positive, 38 were asked to self-isolate and an additional 10 were admitted for COVID-19. By the end of April an outbreak of the virus was declared in two Shelburne long-term care homes

"We've learned our share of hard lessons, and we know that things have got to change in a number of sectors, long-term care being one of them," said White. "Things cannot be like they were a year ago."

For many, the year was a constant pivot as local small businesses developed strategies for online shopping, students switched to online learning, and residents became used to wearing masks.

White said the community's response to the changes has been great.

WDG Public Health Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Nicola Mercer said she's been impressed with the community's ability to adapt to restrictions.

"I've asked them and the province has asked them to do things that are difficult and people have followed through with what we've been asking throughout the pandemic, they sound easy but they're actually quite difficult," said Mercer.

Weeks before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the region, Mercer spent time preparing local hospitals, family health teams, and Ontario health teams for the expected first cases.

“There was no doubt that we were expecting it, we didn't know where locally we would get the first case, but the first cases as would be expect we're all travel cases” that wasn't unexpected,” said Mercer.

One year since the start of the pandemic, what do we know now that we didn't know then?

“There's a lot we didn't know about COVID-19 a year ago,” said Mercer. “We didn't understand how it was transmitted, we didn't understand the incubation period, and we didn't understand how lethal it was going to be if you got it.

“One of the things I didn't know a year ago, was that we would produce a vaccine and actually have it being deliver in about nine months, certainly less than a year,” she added.

March 11 was declared a national day of observance by the federal government and communities lowered the Canadian Flag at half-mass to honour those who have died to the virus.

“It's a grim reminder of where we've been and I don't think any of us ever want to go back there,” said White addressing the anniversary date.

WDG Public Health has announced the second phase of vaccinations opening pre-registration to more eligible groups.

“We're hopeful hitting the one year anniversary that there is some light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccine rollout. We just have to now concentrate on getting those actual shots into actual arms and hopefully, we can get back to some semblance of normalcy,” said White.

When Speaking about the community, he noted his appreciation for their response.

“I thank them for their tremendous patience. I offer my condolences to those who have lost loved ones and I offer my best wishes to those who got sick and have recovered or are currently recovering. But mostly, thanks for the work that every person in Dufferin County has done however big or small to get us to where we are today,” White remarked.

As of March 17, Dufferin County has 26 active cases of COVID-19.