

Dufferin County implements vaccine policy for staff, effective Nov. 1

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Dufferin County staff, contractors, and volunteers will soon need to show proof of full vaccination to attend in-person work spaces, after council implements a COVID-19 vaccination policy.

Dufferin County Council, during their meeting last Thursday (Sept. 9) voted in favour of implementing a vaccination policy, which will go into effect on Nov. 1.

Sonya Pritchard, chief administrative officer for the County of Dufferin, said the Nov. 1 date will give people the full six weeks needed to become fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

While council has passed the vaccination policy, the details of it are still in development. Components of the policy include:

- Individuals who are not vaccinated will be required to undergo regular rapid antigen test prior to being onsite;
- Staff not providing proof of medical or Ontario Human Rights Code exemption will be required to attend an education session on vaccine safety and effectiveness;
- Non-compliance may result in disciplinary action;
- Accommodation on human rights ground will be considered on an individual basis

Pritchard noted that staff will be in discussion with the county's legal team, local municipalities, and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH), particularly regarding exemptions beyond medical.

"It needs review from our legal team, it needs review from Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, which will be part of the discussion," said Pritchard.

Areas in the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph region that have adopted COVID-19 vaccination policies include the City of Guelph, Wellington County, and the Town of Minto. Wellington County adopted a policy on Aug. 23 requiring all new staff to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Guelph adopted their policy on Aug. 30 with specific information on how proof of vaccination is provided, collection of personal health information, city run testing, reasons for exemption, and consequences.

"We'll certainly be trying to stay somewhat consistent or similar to other municipalities in our health unit because we all should be receiving the same direction from public health," said Pritchard.

Although the policy included county staff, this does not mean council members fall under the same mandate. Pritchard said councillors are typically not considered employees and suggested a second policy for councillors.

"I would hope that it would mirror exactly what we're doing with the County employees," said Coun. John Creelman.

"I think it would be out of step to have this in place for municipal staff and then somehow not show leadership in making sure that we get it done ourselves," said Coun. Steve Anderson.

According to County Council's report on the policy, 89 per cent of Dufferin Oaks long term care staff are vaccinated, but there are no stats for other staff.

As part of the policy, unvaccinated individuals will undergo regular rapid antigen testing, with the cost of the testing footed by taxpayers. Councillors shared their concerns on burdening taxpayers.

"Why would the taxpayers of Dufferin County be paying for testing just because individuals decide they don't want to get

vaccinated?? said Coun. Andy Macintosh. ?I understand if people have a medical exemption, but just because they don't feel like getting vaccinated I don't know why the taxpayers cover the cost.?

Dufferin County Warden Darren White added if the county is going to require an education component, it wouldn't be fair to any staff members to not cover the cost at that time.

?Perhaps we have to have a time period where we allow that education component to kick in, but subsequent to that if you refuse then maybe we're in a different arena,? said White.

?During the educational session, yes, it should be afforded to them,? added Coun. Anderson. ?Once the educational session ends and they continue to refuse then all bet are off. I don't think that taxpayers should be on the hook for somebody after receiving the educational session, still refuses and is beyond medical exemption.?

According to the vaccination policy report, the cost of testing has not been determined. The City of London has estimated a cost of \$2,000 to \$3,000 per week but the report says the cost in Dufferin County would be significantly less.

Pritchard recommended Dufferin County move in a similar direction as Guelph, who are paying for the test until the end of the year and then reevaluating at that point on how to move forward.

Dufferin County's vaccination policy was passed with majority but two councillors voted in opposition.

Coun. Bob Currie shared his thoughts on the vaccine, including claims of two individuals having died and one experiencing paralysis.

Coun. Philip Rentsch added his concerns for workplace violence.

?For whatever reason, there's a bunch of people that have chosen vaccinations as their last straw ? we've seen violence. This, in my opinion, is asking for a fight,? said Rentsch

The Dufferin County vaccination policy for staff, contractors, and volunteers will go into effect on Nov. 1.