

Province enters next phase of opening, eliminating vaccine passports

Written By **Paula Brown**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Ontario has moved to the second phase of its reopening plan and plans to remove its proof of vaccine system on March 1

Premier Doug Ford announced the move, which occurred four days ahead of schedule, during a press conference on Monday (Feb. 14).

'Given how well Ontario has done in the Omicron wave, we are able to fast track our reopening plan,' said Ford in a press release. 'This is great news and a sign of just how far we've come together in our fight against the virus. While we aren't out of the woods just yet we are moving in the right direction.'

The move to the second step of the reopening plan means that as of today (Feb. 17) social gathering limits increase to 50 people indoors and to 100 people outdoors. Capacity limits have been lifted for indoor public settings where proof of vaccination was required including restaurants, meeting and event spaces, cinemas, gyms, gaming establishments, and settings that chose to opt-in to proof of vaccination requirements.

Seating capacity of 50 per cent is allowed at sports arenas, concert venues, and theatres.

In higher-risk settings where proof of vaccination is required such as nightclubs, restaurants with dancing, bathhouses and sex clubs, the capacity limit is 25 per cent.

For indoor weddings, funerals or religious services, rites, or ceremonies capacity limits have been removed if the location has opted in for proof of vaccination, while those that have not are limited to the number of people who can maintain two metres physical distance.

Grocery stores, pharmacies and retail stores are capped at the number of people who can maintain two metres of physical distance.

During the press conference on Monday (Feb. 14) Ford also announced the province will be lifting the proof of vaccination system for all settings at the start of next month.

'We're able to take this step now because of each and every one of you, because of our nurses, doctors, hospital workers, because of every single person who volunteered in a vaccine clinic and every single person who played a part in this fight,' said Ford. 'Let me be very clear we're moving in this direction because it's safe to do so.'

He stressed that the decision to remove the proof of vaccination mandate is not because of the anti-vaccine mandate protests taking place across the province, but 'despite' them, and added that the plan to move forward early was in place 'long before the protests'.

Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Kieran Moore addressing the removal of the proof of vaccination system said the policy had 'served its purpose'.

'I thank all the businesses and communities that have used it as well as all the citizen that have shown their QR codes and their passports, but in our estimation given where we are in the epidemic as of March 1, it will no longer be necessary,' he said.

Despite the early moves, the province says masking requirements will remain in place, and businesses and other settings have the choice to continue requiring proof of vaccination.

However, Ford did say a date will be set to lift masking requirements in the future.