

Public Health asks residents to be kind following increasing negativity

Written By **Sam Odrowski**

A letter was issued to the community late last week by Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph's medical officer of health and CEO, Dr. Nicola Mercer asking the public to exercise patience and kindness when engaging with Public Health staff.

The letter notes that in recent weeks, staff have noticed a growing number of aggressive and negative comments directed over the phone, via email and through online comments.

The stress, fear and pandemic fatigue we all feel is real. Most of us are exhausted after a year of living in uncertainty and change. When we feel stressed or scared, our first response may be to translate those feelings into anger and frustration. However, there is never an excuse to bully or abuse anyone – including Public Health staff, wrote Mercer.

Our team will continue to do everything we can to support you and tackle COVID-19. As we do, please exercise patience and kindness if you are engaging with Public Health staff for any reason. Treating each other with compassion and empathy is the only way we will get through this pandemic.

Spokesperson for WDG Public Health, Danny Williamson says the increase in negativity towards the COVID-19 restrictions and Public Health comes down to the pandemic dragging on for an entire year, leaving many tired with a strong desire to get back to normal. Vaccines taking a little longer to rollout due to delayed shipments is a source of frustration for many people as well, he added.

Ultimately, all of Public Health is geared towards getting through this pandemic, whether that's people answering calls at the call centre, whether it's our vaccination team, whether it's our admin team – everybody in our agency is geared in some way towards getting to the end of this pandemic, Williamson remarked.

These calls don't make it easier to be quite frank, but we're trying very hard to be understanding that everybody is feeling this frustration. And really, we're working as fast as we can to get to the end of this thing, because as much as everybody out there wants it over, we want it over here at Public Health and we all want to get to the end of this pandemic.

Williamson said Dr. Mercer is always in favour of the region being as open as possible, as long as their data shows it's safe.

Right now, the WDG region is in the red level of the Province's COVID-19 Framework and as of press time, health system occupancy, new cases reached within 24 hours, and all epidemiology indicators are in the orange, yellow and green categories, except cases per 100,000.

That metric is red at 43.9 cases per 100,000 and would have to decrease to below 40 to turn orange.

If numbers continue to trend in a positive direction and it looks like the whole picture is improving across the region, Williamson said Dr. Mercer would recommend that the Province move WDG from red to orange. The Ford government decides on moving regions in and out of lockdowns based on available data and recommendations made by Public Health's medical officers.

While most people in the government support Public Health restrictions, there's a growing movement among provincial representatives, town councillors, and mayors who have formed the End the Lockdowns Caucus in Canada.

Central Wellington Coun. Steve VanLeeuwen, who is under the WDG Public Health region joined the caucus shortly after it formed early last month. He says there's no reason for the region to be in the red level of COVID-19 lockdowns and the entire Province should have a more targeted approach when imposing restrictions.

'What we need to do is we really need to do is take a look at the vulnerable sector and focus our efforts on protecting those in the 70 and up category,' he said.

'In regards to the younger generation, we can loosen those restrictions and continue life as normal almost, especially because the harms from these lockdowns is affecting and causing more damage than the restrictions themselves are actually doing.'

Coun. VanLeeuwen says he believes the isolation from stay-at-home orders and societal shift towards fearing everyone because they might have COVID-19 is having a detrimental impact on people's mental health.

The negative financial impact of the pandemic on working people is another reason why Coun. VanLeeuwen supports a more specific approach to lockdowns that protects the vulnerable, while allowing young and healthy people to work. Individuals 70 and older account for almost 90 per cent of Canada's COVID-19 deaths, while those under 50 account for just 1.3 per cent.

Coun. VanLeeuwen says that the science doesn't add up when looking at the government's decision to enforce very strict lockdown measures on people who have such a low risk level if they contract the virus. He also stressed that all sectors should be present at the decision-making table regarding COVID-19 restrictions.

'Public Health should have the ability to be at the table, but be one voice at the table instead of the only voice at the table. I think our councils or EOC [Emergency Operations Centre] should be looking at all areas of harm within our community and saying, 'let's focus our response to those who need it the most,' which would be on the elderly and the most vulnerable,' he noted. 'We could put more effort and dollars in funding there.'

Meanwhile, Williamson notes that the community has made a lot of sacrifices to lower and contain COVID-19 numbers since the Ontario-wide lockdown was imposed on Dec. 26 and it's vital that safety measures continue until the majority of people are vaccinated.

'The sentiment of wanting to get all this stuff over with as quickly as we can, everybody feels that so it's really about making tough choices here,' he said.

'It has not escaped the folks at public health, our various local leaders, our politicians ? it has not escaped those folks that this is a serious trade off that we need to battle this pandemic.'

Williamson said with over 22,000 vaccinations now distributed and more on the way, the community is starting to see a 'light at the end of the tunnel.'