

DELIVERED TO: dr.david.williams@ontario.ca
Barbara.yaffe@ontario.ca
Laura.seeds@ontario.ca

March 1, 2021

Dr. David Williams
Chief Medical Officer of Health
Government of Ontario

Re: Vaccination Prioritization of Developmental Service Sector – Individuals and Staff

Dr. Williams:

It is with great urgency that we write on behalf of the Provincial Network on Developmental Services to ask for your immediate response to the inequity occurring in prioritization process within Ontario Public Health as it relates to vaccinating those individuals with developmental disabilities living in congregate care settings and their care providers.

High-Risk Population

The Ontario government identified high-risk populations for immediate priority and included seniors in congregate settings, those receiving chronic home health care and the essential staff who support them. In some public health units, they have not had the opportunity to differentiate and pull out the data to distinguish Adults with developmental disabilities in these settings creating the need to align across regions. We have lead sector experts who can assist in pulling that data consistent with the work done in York Region.

The prioritization reflects data on Adults with developmental disabilities who are four to six times more likely to die of COVID. I will also draw your attention to an [Ontario study](#) that shows that people with developmental disabilities have a similar frailty level at the age of 50 to those in the general public at the age of 80. This means that those with developmental disabilities are at higher risk for contracting COVID-19.

Furthermore, large-scale studies have shown that persons with lifelong intellectual/developmental disabilities such as, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder are more susceptible than the general population to develop COVID-19 infection and to suffer more severe outcomes including death from infection.

Therefore, as all Public Health units begin their COVID-19 vaccine distribution rollout, it is essential that all persons with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities, as well as their caregivers (including personal assistants, family members, and persons working in disability-related services) are considered as part of the regional prioritization plan. In Toronto, this past week 5 DS agencies were contacted to have their staff vaccinated but the remaining 29 agencies and other high risk congregate setting managers were not. Province wide York Region has completed all congregate settings and all frontline staff have been scheduled for vaccinations, similar progress is occurring in Guelph, Kitchener, Kingston, Belleville amongst others. This is leading to a clear inequity in process and vaccination.

Congregate Care Settings

Congregate care settings have been hard hit by COVID-19. Vaccination prioritization efforts from other countries such as the U.K., the U.S., Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands include adults with developmental disabilities in early phases of their vaccination rollout.

While we recognize the risk in long-term care facilities, these are not the only congregate care settings requiring our attention. Research from other countries has shown that adults with developmental disabilities living in congregate care settings, including group homes, are at [greater risk of death](#) from COVID-19.

As an example, York Region Public Health have successfully begun vaccinating individuals in congregate care settings in partnership with developmental service agencies who hold a seat at their vaccination planning table. It is essential that all Public Health units in Ontario have a similar system in place?

We recommend that given the identified risks and consistent with provincial guidelines reflecting an equity lens that all congregate setting residents and staff be identified as high priority.

We can help

These “errors of omission” occur countless times and will no doubt occur again. While we wait to learn whether and how people with developmental disabilities will be prioritized, you can work closely with them, their families, our agencies and our staff to demonstrate that they matter.

Developmental service agencies have been working with their colleagues across the province to prepare for the timely rollout of vaccines to those we support and our staff, based on the provincial priority and ethical framework. We are prepared with consent forms, locations and the necessary information of those ready to receive the vaccine. This worked out well with other developmental services in York Region and we can leverage their knowledge to assist other Public Health units with rapid deployment.

Dr. Williams, we need you and Ontario Public Health to act now. Please direct your staff to advise the Public Health units to begin the immediate inoculation of those with developmental disabilities and their caregivers.

I invite you to contact either of us to discuss how we can initiate an immediate solution.

Sincerely,

Bryan Keshen
Bryan Keshen
Co-Chair
Vaccine Working Group

Lorrie Heffernan
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Co-Chair
Vaccine Working Group

The Provincial Network consists of provincial organizations whose members provide supports and services to people with developmental disabilities and their families across Ontario. The network works together on issues of shared interest and consensus and functions as a vehicle for open communication,

information sharing, and position and message development between the organizations and government representatives.

- cc. Christine Elliot, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
Todd Smith, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services