

Developmental Services Planning & Advisory Council (DSPAC) of Waterloo Region

February 1, 2022

Dr. Hsiu-Li Wang
Commissioner & Medical Officer of Health
Region of Waterloo Public Health & Emergency Services

[Sent via Email to: hwang@regionofwaterloo.ca](mailto:hwang@regionofwaterloo.ca)

**Re: Prioritization of Individuals Living with Developmental Disabilities for COVID-19
Fourth Booster Vaccine Dose**

Dear Dr. Wang,

We are writing to ask for your support to prioritize COVID-19 fourth-dose vaccines for individuals living with developmental disabilities in congregate living settings and in community, and the essential caregivers (family and front-line staff) who support them.

The Developmental Services sector was ignored when we advocated for the prioritization of third-doses as early as August 2021. When third doses were made available to our sector in mid-December (not prioritized, but aligned with access given to the general population) it was far too late for our local sector organizations and partners to plan, deliver and mobilize a coordinated third-dose booster response, and the consequence of this delay is clearly demonstrated by the dire impact of the local Omicron surge which commenced in the third week of December. Now, Ontario Public Health data from December 20, 2019 to January 19, 2022 illustrates outbreaks in congregate living centres that match or surpass those in long-term care homes.

Congregate Living		Long-term Care Homes
Group Homes/Supportive Housing	362	420
Shelters	111	
Short-term Accommodation	1	
Congregate other	79	
Total	553	420

These numbers would be higher if developmental service agencies did not go beyond the requirements asked of them to protect supported individuals, including enhanced infection and control measures.

Furthermore, we shared information from an Ontario retrospective cohort [study](#) that illustrated a heightened susceptibility to severe complications. This included evidence that relative to adults with developmental disabilities, COVID-19 positivity rates were **nearly 30% higher for adults with developmental disabilities and more than 40% higher for adults with Down syndrome.**

Compared to adults without developmental disabilities, adults with developmental disabilities were **more than twice as likely to be hospitalized following COVID-19 and to die.** These were greater for adults under 65. For adults with Down syndrome, mortality rates were **6.59 times higher than those without.** It is also imperative to note that a proportion of adults 18+ with developmental disabilities also have medically fragile / technologically dependent support needs in congregate living settings and have heightened immunocompromised status.

As recently as this week a study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* and reported in [The Globe and Mail](#) found that adult COVID-19 patients with disabilities had **36 per cent longer hospital stays and a 77 per cent increased risk of readmission within 30 days.** Researchers at the University of Toronto and Unity Health Toronto looked at 1,279 patients – 22.3 per cent of whom had a recorded disability – who were hospitalized for COVID-19 at seven nearby hospitals from January through November 2020. **They found that patients with traumatic brain injury, intellectual or developmental disabilities, and multiple disabilities had the highest risks for poor COVID-19 outcomes.**

These findings reinforce other research demonstrating that these individuals are a complex and highly vulnerable population. A plan is needed that includes people with disabilities at its centre, if we don't count them, they don't count. It is our collective responsibility to consider their needs inside and outside of our healthcare system.

We are seeking a provincial statement announcing the prioritization of fourth-dose vaccines for those with developmental disabilities in parallel with other immunocompromised individuals and vulnerable, elderly living in high-risk congregate settings. Doing so will alleviate delays, clarify omissions and we can begin protecting those at risk. The continued omission of those with developmental disabilities will result in avoidable health disparities that are unjust, unnecessary and places increased demand on our already overburdened health care system.

We have proven that our sector is well organized and capable of coordinating and operating clinics and mobile teams, collaborating with public health units, and teaming up with other community groups to inoculate the individuals we support in supportive and familiar environments to meet their unique needs.

I invite you to contact us to discuss how the Developmental Services Planning and Advisory Council of Waterloo Region can assist with fourth dose vaccination efforts for individuals supported, and their essential caregivers in our sector.

Sincerely,

Laura Thies, Chair

Developmental Services Planning
& Advisory Council
of Waterloo Region

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Ann Bilodeau, Executive Director

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On behalf of the following DSPAC Waterloo Region Member Organizations:

Aldaview Services – Louise Lepp, Executive Director

Christian Horizons – Sharon Dam, Area Manager

Community Living Cambridge - Lawna Paulos, Executive Director

DeafBlind Ontario Services – Amanda Mesko, Community Engagement Manager

Elmira and District Community Living - Cheryl Peterson, Executive Director

KW Extend-A-Family – Allan Mills, Executive Director

KW Habilitation Services - Ann Bilodeau, Executive Director

Parents for Community Living - Katherine Loveys, Chief Executive Officer

Sunbeam Community & Developmental Services – Brian Swainson, Chief Executive Officer

CC: Honorable Merrilee Fullerton, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services
Rupert Gordon, Assistant Deputy Minister - Children, Community and Social Services
Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health - Office of Chief Medical Officer of Health,
Public Health
Karen Redman, Regional Chair - Region of Waterloo
Amy Fee, Member of Provincial Parliament, Kitchener South - Hespeler
Dr. Kevin Stinson, Waterloo-Wellington IPAC Hub Lead
Ingrid Pregel, KW4 Ontario Health Team, Transformation Lead
Kristina Eliashevsky , Cambridge North Dumfries Ontario Health Team, Transformation Lead
Michelle Brooks, Chair, Provincial Network on Developmental Services