

That includes a \$1 billion contingency fund to direct as needed depending on how hard COVID-19 hits the province as the government considers whether to put overflow hospital patients in hotels.

In addition, there is \$160 million to boost lab-testing capacity and surveillance of the virus amid concerns Ontario has had to limit testing to the most serious cases and health-care workers.

Experts have warned that leaves many milder cases undetected as the number of confirmed cases alone rises about 20 per cent daily. The cases going undetected makes it impossible for local public health officials to track their close contacts and isolate them to slow the spread of the virus.

Home testing kits will be provided when they become available, said the financial statement that also sets aside \$935 million to improve capacity in overcrowded hospitals with more acute- and critical-care beds.

Nursing homes, which are full of elderly citizens who are highly vulnerable to the virus and the most likely to become seriously ill, will share \$243 million to boost their emergency capacity and implement more virus containment measures.

Another \$80 million is going to nursing homes to maintain “quality” of care, with staff expected to be overworked amid outbreaks that have already hit a number of long-term care facilities and resulted in several deaths.

Given fears that health-care workers are running low on personal protective equipment, an extra \$75 million has been earmarked — along with \$120 million for improvements to home and community care and another \$62 million to hire more doctors, nurses and personal support workers.

Mindful of the importance of social distancing, the province will spend \$23.8 million to boost the number of doctors seeing patients by video or helping them via email or phone.

College and university students will also get a six-month break in repaying their Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) loans — a move that follows a similar interest-free period announced by the federal government last week.

– with files from *Toronto Star*



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