



NEWS

The COVID-19 vaccine is coming. Are immunity passports next?

By **Rob Ferguson** Queen's Park Bureau

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Ontario is about to examine the role that proof of **COVID-19** vaccination or “immunity passports” will play in society as new daily cases remain near record levels.

With the first shots expected soon and the province reporting 1,890 more infections Wednesday, Premier **Doug Ford's** government is looking at providing “tech-based” certificates in addition to alternatives for people who prefer not to keep such records on devices such as smart phones.

Following a warning from Health Minister Christine Elliott that “there may be some restrictions...placed on people that don’t have vaccinations,” her office said in a statement that a dialogue is beginning on what consensus will develop given the highly contagious nature of the virus.

“We look forward to working with our health experts and Ontario’s businesses to discuss how we can continue to operate safely, and whether or not providing proof of vaccination will have a role to play.”

University of Toronto bioethicist Kerry Bowman said proof is expected for international travel, some airline flights, employment in hospitals and long-term-care homes once the shots are widely available.

But other areas are less clear and there is the complication that no vaccines have yet been approved for children under 16, in addition to people who cannot take certain vaccines because they are prone to severe allergic reactions and the charter rights of those who don’t believe in vaccination.

“It’s very unlikely a workplace could say you cannot return to work unless you’re vaccinated, but in Ontario there’s very strict legislation on making sure workplaces are safe...so there could easily be challenges there,” said Bowman.

He predicted “market forces” will prevail in some cases, with restaurants or other businesses boasting all their staff have vaccinations and using that as a competitive advantage.

Elliott said Ontarians will find proof of vaccination “essential” because proprietors may require it to get into movie theatres and similar venues where close contact is likely.

The proof may become moot in time, however, if enough people are vaccinated and herd immunity is achieved, Bowman noted.

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Ontario's new COVID-19 infections Wednesday pushed the seven-day moving average of cases to a record 1,840.

Hospitalizations topped 800 for the first time since the end of May during the first wave, with 221 patients in intensive care and 129 of them on ventilators. A week ago, there were 656 people in hospital for the virus.

"The situation in our hospitals is not getting any better," Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie told a news conference, adding that Trillium in her city is transferring patients elsewhere because of COVID outbreaks.

Toronto and Peel, both in their third week of lockdown, had 517 and 471 new cases respectively. In the red or "control" zone of restrictions one shy of lockdown, York had 187, Hamilton 97, Halton 96, Durham 75 and Windsor-Essex 94.

Infections have been surging in Windsor and Essex County with more than 400 new cases since going into the red zone Nov. 30, prompting local medical officer Dr. Wajid Ahmed to hint tougher public health restrictions may be needed.

"Our case rates are comparable to the areas that are in the lockdown," he said. "We are on the verge of having the local health system capacity get overwhelmed...the risk of acquiring COVID-19 in our community is increasing at a rapid rate."

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