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It's 'all hands on deck' as health unit prepares for February vaccine rollout

Priority will be for long-term-care residents and staff

By [Catherine Whitnall](#) Kawartha Lakes This Week

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The local health unit has a plan; all that's missing is the COVID-19 vaccine.

As everyone waits their turn, acting medical officer of health Dr. Ian Gemmill, Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit, stresses the importance of adhering to public health and provincial guidelines.

Of the health unit's 730 cases, roughly 30 per cent have been identified as household

contact, with another 30 per cent the result of close contact. What's troubling, he notes, is that, for about 20 per cent of cases, a source cannot be specifically identified.

"These are the consequences of the social gatherings that occurred during the Christmas holidays ... This virus needs people and it needs behaviours that promote its spread," said Gemmill, pointing out that the lockdown seems to be having the necessary effect as recent reports are half of what they were in early January.

But Gemmill notes that getting people vaccinated, as quickly as possible, is key to quashing COVID-19.

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"Restrictions can impact the spread but they can't go on forever," said Gemmill.

Gemmill is optimistic supplies will arrive in the area in early February, targeting long-term-care home staff and residents, front-line health-care workers and essential workers first — but not their family — with the general population receiving shots in late spring. Only those aged 18 and older will be eligible for vaccination as there were no clinical trials with children conducted.

Gemmill anticipates being able to vaccinate long-term-care home residents and staff in the "four figures" on a daily basis. The only limitation is the need to travel to various residences. He noted that it's likely places already in outbreak would be at the top of the list, along with those with factors such as ventilation system inefficiencies and challenges in cohorting residents.

The health unit is working with its health care and municipal partners to finalize aspects of its mass vaccination plan. This includes the use of large facilities, such as arenas, that are large enough to both accommodate large numbers of people, but in a safe manner. A drive-thru option is "on the agenda," but Gemmill notes this could make monitoring people for side effects — although extremely rare — a challenge, versus a venue.

“When the vaccine arrives, it will be all hands on deck,” said Gemmill.

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