

Kawartha health unit ‘ready to go’ when region receives COVID-19 vaccine

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Vaccine should be distributed to long-term care homes in Kawartha Lakes, Northumberland, and Haliburton in early February

By [Hannah Abrahamse](#) -
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The Haliburton, Kawartha Pine Ridge District (HKPR) Health Unit has completed a COVID-19 vaccine program and plans to submit it to Ontario’s health ministry later this week.

“We are ready to go as soon as we’ve got a vaccine available, with a focus on the residents, staff, and essential caregivers in long-term care,” the acting medical officer of health, Dr. Ian Gemmill, said during a virtual media briefing on Wednesday (January 20).

According to Dr. Gemmill, the program is based on the health unit’s past immunization plan. However, they have spent the last few weeks reviewing and revising it to be more specific to COVID-19.

“It’s based on our previous experience of mass immunization, and the experience of others who have been running mass immunization in high-instance areas, who have already worked with coronavirus,” he said.

The program includes a plan for vaccine distribution to long-term care homes and high-risk retirement homes — the health unit’s priority when they receive the vaccine supply expected in early February. Healthcare workers will also be offered the vaccine as it becomes available.

“The next in line after long-term care homes, healthcare workers, and home-care patients will be other essential workers,” explained Dr. Gemmill. “People who have to work to keep our society going during this pandemic.”

The health unit will then distribute the vaccine to at-risk older adults, followed by all older adults, followed by the general population.

While Dr. Gemmill said he hopes to begin the HKPR area’s first phase of vaccine distribution in early February, this is subject to change as supplies change.

Retired general Rick Hillier, chair of Ontario’s vaccine distribution task force, announced yesterday there is a shortage of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine due to a production issue in Belgium, and there will be no shipments to Canada next week.

Currently, two vaccines have been approved for use in Canada: the Pfizer vaccine and the Moderna vaccine. Dr. Gemmill said the Moderna vaccine is “probable for this area given the shortage of the Pfizer.”

“It’s too bad that we’re having these supply issues,” said Dr. Gemmill, “but what I’m asking people is to be patient because the commitment, I know, from all of our government, is that the vaccine will be in arms as quickly as we can get the vaccine in place. We are going to make sure that happens in this area.”

“We’ve been told that by March, we won’t have to be worrying about the supply,” he added.

In the meantime, Dr. Gemmill assured the HKPR Health Unit is prepared to distribute the vaccine as soon as supply becomes available.

“We have a plan in place, and once the vaccine is ready to go, we are ready to go.”

Dr. Gemmill said the key principles in their completed immunization plan are efficiency, “once we get the vaccine to get it into arms as fast as possible,” and accessibility, “which means people don’t have to drive for hours to get their dose of vaccine.”

“Then we are also, of course, being guided by, and must adhere to, the priority list given by local direction,” he added. “But within that, we will be looking at local risk. If we don’t have enough vaccine for all the long-term care homes, we will be looking at the ones at the highest risk first.”

There are many aspects involved in preparing to distribute a vaccine, according to Dr. Gemmill.

“We’re talking to healthcare providers, many who have offered to help us to immunize,” he said. “We’ve talked to municipalities about what venues we can use. For security, we’ve talked to our colleagues in the police force. We’ve been talking to our indigenous community at Alderville about how to design it for that community as well.”

As for vaccine distribution venues, Dr. Gemmill says the health unit is looking into large buildings such as arenas.

“We want to ensure we do this in a way that secures safety. So, for instance, people are not exposed to coronavirus as they’re waiting to get their vaccine.”

Dr. Gemmill said the health unit’s shift to vaccine planning is “a bright light.”

“One month ago, we had no vaccine. That meant that we couldn’t do anything. Restrictions in place can hold back the spread, but they can’t be in place forever and, therefore, we need the vaccine to protect the population so we can get back to normal.”

As of January 20th, there are 63 active cases of COVID-19 in the region served by the health unit, including 20 in the City of Kawartha Lakes, 39 in Northumberland County, and four in Haliburton County. There have been eight COVID-related deaths in the region so far this year, including four in Kawartha Lakes and four in Northumberland.

Comments
