



NEWS

Ontario walks back sweeping new police powers

The Canadian Press

Saturday, April 17, 2021

TORONTO — Ontario reversed course on sweeping new police powers Saturday, just one day after Premier Doug Ford announced the measures that triggered a swift and furious backlash.

Officers will no longer have the right to stop any pedestrian or driver to ask why they're out or request their home address, Solicitor General Sylvia Jones said in a written statement on Saturday evening.

Instead, she said, police will only be able to stop people who they have reason to

believe are participating in an "organized public event or social gathering."

As the number of people infected with COVID-19 in hospital reached record levels, Ford tweeted that another of the measures would also be reversed.

"Ontario's enhanced restrictions were always intended to stop large gatherings where spread can happen," Ford said. "Our regulations will be amended to allow playgrounds, but gatherings outside will still be enforced."

Civil libertarians and pundits attacked new anti-pandemic restrictions announced Friday by Ford as misguided, saying the added police powers aimed at enforcing stay-at-home orders were overkill.

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association welcomed Saturday's reversal.

"The new order rationalizes and narrows the unconstitutional Friday standard. The new standard is also tied to a public health objective, and avoids arbitrary detention," said Michael Bryant, executive director of the CCLA.

Ahead of the reversal, large and small police forces across the province said they had no intention of exercising their newfound powers.

Andrew Fletcher, chief of the South Simcoe Police Service, said officers would only act on complaints. Police forces from Thunder Bay to Ottawa to Toronto and Woodstock expressed similar positions.

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"We are all going through a horrific year of COVID-19 and all associated with it together. The HRPS will NOT be randomly stopping vehicles for no reason during the pandemic or afterwards (RIDE being an exception)," Halton Police Chief Steve Tanner tweeted before the province walked back the regulations.

The closing of outdoor spaces, meanwhile, puzzled many public health experts who said the measures didn't make sense.

"Outdoor activities are vital for mental and physical health, especially with stay-at-home orders," Dr. Isaac Bogoch, who sits on the province's COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Task Force, said in a tweet.

"Science is clear: Outdoor COVID transmission is extremely rare."

The pandemic, meanwhile, continued unabated on Saturday. The number of patients in hospital due to the novel coronavirus rose above 2,000 for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, with 726 in intensive care and 501 needing a ventilator, authorities reported.

To help manage the record number of hospitalizations, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair announced Saturday that two federal mobile health units would remain in the province until at least the end of June.

Health officials also recorded 34 more deaths related to the virus -- the highest single-day count in almost two months, when 47 people were reported as dying from coronavirus disease.

The province logged 4,362 new cases on Saturday, down from Friday's record-setting number of 4,812. Globally, the pandemic has now killed more than three million people.

The new restrictions, including a two-week extension to the province's stay-at-home order until May 20, were announced amid dire warnings from government scientific advisers that the pandemic was only set to worsen.

Other measures include further restrictions on outdoor gatherings and indoor religious services, while recreational facilities such as golf courses are now closed. Ontario intends to shut its borders with Quebec and Manitoba to non-essential travel effective Monday.

Ford said Friday the province was "on its heels" and the measures were urgently needed to bring the province's raging COVID-19 situation under control.

But experts said Ford had missed the mark on key drivers of the pandemic, including a lack of paid sick leave for essential workers and a dearth of evidence playgrounds have been a transmission source.

"Doug Ford's handling of this pandemic has been an abject failure and absolute disaster," said Patty Coates, president of the Ontario Federation of Labour.

Brampton Mayor Patrick Brown, a father of two young children, welcomed the change of heart on playgrounds, saying "common sense wins."

"Now let's have a discussion on other outdoor amenities as well," Brown said.

This report by The Canadian Press was first published April 17, 2021.

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