

PUBLIC HEALTH GRAPPLES WITH INCREASED COVID-19 CASE LOAD

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As COVID-19 infections rise in Halton, public health officials are fighting to keep pace with the amount of legwork generated by each new positive test result.

"We are struggling right now with case and contact management," Halton Medical Officer of Health Dr. Hamidah Meghani told regional councillors during their most recent meeting. "While we are trying to on-board more and more staff towards this herculean task, it takes a lot of time (to get staff ready)."

The province has set a benchmark for public health units to reach at least 90 per cent of residents who've tested positive for COVID-19 within 24 hours. In recent weeks,

Halton Public Health has been averaging 70 to 80 per cent.

Numbers have also been falling below 90 per cent when it comes to contact tracing in Halton, peaking mid-November with an average of almost 70 per cent of high-risk contacts being reached within 24 hours — a figure that dropped to a 40 per cent average by month end.

"We are absolutely trying our level best to make sure we're getting ahold of cases and contacts, but it is becoming a larger issue than it was back in September," said Meghani.

Since the pandemic started, Meghani said her staff has grown from 12 nurses on the communicable disease team to over 70 in the infectious disease control area of the health department.

All are tasked with do-



Metroland file photo

Halton Medical Officer of Health Dr. Hamidah Meghani continues to urge residents to wear a mask, social distance and limit contacts.

ing COVID-19 case and contact tracing, along with management of coronavi-

rus outbreaks in the community.

But more hands on deck

also equals the need for more managers to oversee them.

"There just aren't enough supervisors, managers, and for that matter medical officers of health to go around," said Meghani. "We're doing our best to on-board individuals who have the right skill set, but at the end of the day we have to manage those individuals as well in our organization."

Meghani said her staff will continue to grow over the next couple of weeks, with additional resources coming through the Ministry of Health, including management support.

Public health is also looking at other ways to make things more efficient, such as the automation of some steps, she noted.

"As those things come together, we should be able

to save some staff time to make those first contacts happen more quickly," Meghani said.

So what's the ultimate solution?

"It's really about keeping case counts low," she said. "If we can do that, we can be much more efficient in Halton and surrounding communities at case and contact management."

She strongly urged all residents to continue physical distancing, wearing masks and reducing the number of people they're in contact with as much as possible.

"COVID-19 is not going away. It's not going away in 2021," she said. "It will be here with us for some period of time, and unfortunately that means we have to learn to live this way for a longer period of time."

For further details visit halton.ca/COVID19.

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