

COVID CASES PUTTING STRAIN ON HOSPITALS

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munity to keep their social bubble small and continue to follow public health guidelines to wear a mask, use hand sanitizer and maintain physical distancing.

Even with the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines, the full impact won't be felt for months, she added.

"That's because for a vaccine to work, and to work well, you have to have a certain number of people, a certain proportion of the population, to be vaccinated. And it's not a fast fix," Alam explained. "It's slow, it's steady. It will help us at some point, but it's not going to help us next week. It's not going to help us in three weeks from now."

In reflecting on the past year during the December regional council meeting, Halton Medical Officer of

Health Dr. Hamidah Meghani said the number of inpatients at Halton hospitals with confirmed COVID-19 has followed a similar rise and fall pattern with the number of cases in the community.

During the first wave, these hospital numbers peaked in April with 26 inpatients, and then dropped to none over the summer.

"However, as part of the second wave, we've begun to see more beds occupied by confirmed COVID-19 cases again," she said.

By mid-December, there were 42 inpatients, representing a 110-per-cent increase over the previous four weeks, noted Meghani. About a quarter of those patients were in the ICU.

"The presence of COVID-19 patients in the hospital and ICU shows COVID-19 is having an impact on the health-care system

locally and leading to beds being occupied that could be used for other purposes," she said. "As a result, some hospitals in the GTA have been facing challenges in providing their usual level of care."

Three out of the four hospitals in Halton have declared outbreaks in recent weeks, which Meghani said is "reflective of the degree of community spread."

"It's community cases that lead to cases in health-care institutions, where there are far more infection-prevention and -control measures in place than many other settings."

Officials are hopeful the Ontario-wide lockdown that began Dec. 26 will help reduce COVID-19 case numbers and, ultimately, ease the burden on the health-care system.

"Thousands of lives are at stake right now," said

Premier Doug Ford. "If we fail to take action now, the consequences could be catastrophic."

Nearly full hospital beds isn't the only way the coronavirus has challenged Halton's four communities since the pandemic began in March. Here's a look at how Burlington, Oakville, Milton and Halton Hills have been impacted over the past 10 months:

Between March and June, 25 Halton residents lost their lives to COVID-19. From July to September, there were no new deaths, but the number started climbing again in October, as the second wave began, and surpassed 90 by mid-December.

Long-term care homes have been particularly hit hard. Out of 18 long-term care homes in Halton, 17 had been impacted by COVID-19 at press time, with

dozens of residents succumbing to the virus.

Halton Public Health has been pushed to its limits with COVID-19 case tracking and managing outbreaks. Since the pandemic started, Meghani's staff has grown from 12 nurses on the communicable disease team to over 70 in the infectious disease control area of the health department.

Halton students have had a whirlwind year, with schools closing after March break and not opening again until September. This also presented a particular challenge for thousands of parents who suddenly found themselves working at home due to the pandemic.

Many businesses, particularly restaurants, have permanently closed as a result of COVID-19 restrictions and regulations severely reducing their income.

But there have also been stories of hope and perseverance across the

region throughout these challenging times. From parades to honour front-line workers and groups rallying to sew masks for those who need them to residents helping each other with grocery drop offs during times of self-isolation or quarantine, the Halton community spirit has shone brightly.

Even in the darkest hour, life still goes on, said Alam, who encourages people to hold on to beautiful moments of life despite the terrible circumstances.

She said she sees 2020 as a wake-up call for society to change and reset social injustices that many have faced for decades.

"It's the year that redefined our humanity."

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With 2020 drawing to a close, we wanted to take a closer look at the overall impact the pandemic has had on Halton's health-care system, residents and businesses.

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