

PARTIES DIFFER ON COVID MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES

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MacDonald said in the last couple of months there has been an explosion of positive COVID-19 cases in schools.

"The pandemic is not over," he said.

MacDonald also voiced concerns about the growing number of children he sees dealing with pandemic related mental health issues, nursing shortages and hospital staff burnout, surgical backlogs, and the impacts of long COVID on children and adults.

These problems and others, MacDonald argues, make the future handling of the pandemic a key election issue.

Metroland's Halton newspapers — including the Independent and Free Press — sent questions to the political parties that have provincial election candidates in the region's ridings, asking how they would deal with COVID-19 going forward. Here is what they said.

Ontario Progressive Conservative party spokesperson Caitlin Clark said a reelected PC government would keep the province open by investing more in health care than any government in Ontario history.

This would include a \$40-billion investment in hospital infrastructure over the next 10 years and adding more nurses, doctors, and personal support workers to Ontario's health-care workforce.

"We are shoring up domestic production of critical supplies, like personal protective equipment and vaccines, and investing in hospitals, long-term-care homes and home care," said Clark.

Clark did not respond to a question about whether a reelected Ford government would reintroduce mask mandates, capacity limits, vaccine passports or impose school or business



lockdowns if COVID-19 case counts rose high enough.

Ontario Liberal Party spokesperson Will Wuehr said an elected Liberal government would add the COVID-19 vaccine to the list of vaccines required for students in publicly funded schools.

He said the Liberals would also combat retention issues in the health-care sector by repealing Bill 124, which limits annual salary increases for public sector workers.

The Liberals have pledged to increase compensation for front-line health care workers and bring in a \$25/hr floor on wages for personal support workers.

"Most importantly, we will listen to doctors and base our public health decisions on science instead of political polls," said Wuehr.

Ontario NDP spokesperson Rhyann Vincent-Smith said an elected NDP government would hold a full, independent, judicial public inquiry into all aspects of Ontario's COVID-19 response so government can learn and be ready for any future health crises.

He said the NDP has also committed to introduce a new Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act and other pandemic legislation to strengthen the government's ability to respond to crises.

The NDP promised stability for small businesses, noting that in the event of future public health restrictions they will provide timely proportional support that is easy to access.

Another promise focused on the thousands of COVID long-haulers, with the NDP noting it would make sure these individu-



Graham Paine/Metroland

COVID-19 rapid antigen testing remains a common practice throughout Ontario, and beyond.

als are supported by their primary care providers and broader health teams.

Vincent-Smith said an NDP government would invest in research to better understand the causes, symptoms and treatments of long COVID.

While the Green Party of Ontario did not respond to email Metroland Halton's questions, it has pledged to take politics out of the chief medical officer of health position by designating them an independent officer of the legislature in a watchdog role with annual publicly available reporting.

The Green Party said it would provide adequate and predictable funding to ensure future pandemic preparedness.

The Greens also promised to hold an independent public inquiry into the government's response to COVID-19 and said they would stockpile a three-month supply of personal protective equipment for all health-care facilities in the province.

New Blue party Leader Jim Karahalios said his party would end all COVID-19 mandates and repeal all of the emergency measures introduced by the Ford government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

He also promised to ban the use of COVID-19 vaccine passports, whether in

the public or private sector.

Karahalios said he would review and reduce the powers of "local bureaucrats" who shut down businesses over COVID-19 rule violations.

Other promises included restitution for those harmed by COVID-19 emergency measures and reinstating nurses who were fired for not complying with COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

Karahalios said his government's COVID-19 response would focus on expanding and promoting COVID-19 early treatment.

Ontario Moderate Party Leader Yuri Duboisky would also end all COVID-19 mandates, arguing that all the measures taken by the government during the pandemic were completely useless.

"Our position is that people should be free to travel. It is not necessary to lock people inside," said Duboisky.

He said an Ontario Moderate Party government would also invest financial resources in education promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Freedom Party of Ontario Leader Paul McKeever said a Freedom Party government would end all remaining mask requirements in both the public and private sector, and end all COVID-19 vaccination mandates.

He said the province's COVID-19 vaccination campaign would be ended and those who still want the vaccine can pay for it themselves.

Another Freedom Party promise would require employers to compensate employees who were dismissed for not getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

McKeever said a Freedom Party government would also introduce a law that would require the government to hold an election within six months of a state of emergency being declared.

Ontario Party Leader Derek Sloan noted on his party's website that an Ontario Party government will immediately end any remaining restrictions on "personal autonomy and liberty" instituted by the Ford government in the name of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"For our party, shutdowns and lockdowns are over. We don't think they were effective in curbing the spread and we would not be implementing them," said Sloan.

"We would of course encourage symptomatic sick people to stay home, but we wouldn't be quarantining the asymptomatic or healthy population."

Sloan said his government would also assist Ontario residents who suffered permanent injuries

caused by a COVID-19 vaccine, in pursuing legal actions against the responsible parties, which could include employers or school administrators.

The Ontario Party has also pledged to ensure resources and staff in Ontario hospitals, retirement homes, and other related facilities are sufficient to keep the medically vulnerable, in particular the elderly, safe and healthy.

Sloan said they would also expand access to early COVID-19 treatments.

None of the Above Direct Democracy Party Leader Greg Vezina said a government run by his party would seek recommendations from disaster and emergency management experts, and not just medical professionals, on how to proceed with the pandemic.

He argues this big picture approach would have avoided lockdowns, business closures and many deaths if it had been implemented sooner.

Vezina said he would have difficulty justifying a return to COVID-related mandates and lockdowns unless the virus became significantly more lethal.

"If the medical and economic consequences of a variant were so great that a disaster and emergency manager told you to lock down, you would lock down," said Vezina.

Consensus Ontario Party Leader Brad Harness noted if a Consensus government were formed, Independent MPPs would represent each riding.

These MPPs would learn how the majority of residents in their ridings want to deal with COVID-19 and then bring those views to the legislature.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: COVID-19 doesn't seem to be going away any time soon. With that in mind, we thought it was important for residents to know how the different political parties plan to manage the pandemic if elected.