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# Community Report



**PublicHealth**  
WELLINGTON-DUFFERIN-GUELPH  
*Stay Well.*

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# Strategic Framework

## Mission

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health uses an innovative approach to deliver evidence-informed programs and services to meet the distinctive needs of our communities.

## Strategic Priority

Get ready for change.

## Service Delivery

### Key Activities

1. Adapt services to improve client experience.
2. Ensure services are delivered in an integrated manner that considers our role in the broader sector.
3. Expand digitalization of the services we provide.

### Outcomes

- Appropriate client access and greater client satisfaction.
- A shift in focus from “how can we fix it ourselves?” to “how can the system best address it?”
- Increased accessibility and efficiency.

## System Transformation

### Key Activities

1. Senior leadership team to conduct group conversations with each program about our role in the system transformation.
2. Develop plans and update processes for all administrative areas and information technology systems.
3. Have everyone ask themselves “how am I getting ready for change?”

### Outcomes

- Greater engagement and understanding of what to expect and what we should be doing.
- Updated documentation, a new expense reporting system, and administrative readiness.
- Enhanced capacity for change agency-wide.

## Knowledge Broker

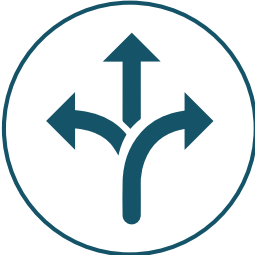
### Key Activities

1. Collect, analyze, interpret and disseminate population health data.
2. Integrate evidence into policy development and decision-making with the broader public sector.
3. Measure impact and effectiveness of community interventions.

### Outcomes

- Establish ourselves as experts on public health issues in our communities.
- See our programs and services meeting community needs.
- We understand what is working.

**Guiding Values**



**Flexibility**



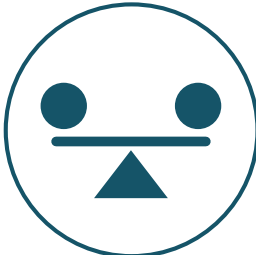
**Collaboration**



**Value for Money**



**Integrity**



**Equality**





# 2020

# Board of Health Members

**George Bridge (Chair)**

Councillor, County of Wellington  
Mayor, Town of Minto  
Representing County of Wellington

**Allan Ails**

Councillor, County of Wellington  
Mayor, Town of Erin  
Representing County of Wellington

**Chris White (Secretary-Treasurer)**

Councillor, County of Wellington  
Mayor, Township of Guelph-Eramosa  
Representing County of Wellington

**Christine Billings (Vice-Chair)**

Councillor, City of Guelph  
Representing City of Guelph

**June Hofland**

Councillor, City of Guelph  
Representing City of Guelph

**Rodrigo Goller**

Councillor, City of Guelph  
Representing City of Guelph

**Guy Gardhouse**

Councillor, County of Dufferin  
Mayor, Township of East Garafraxa  
Representing County of Dufferin

**Ralph Manktelow**

County of Dufferin Citizen Appointee  
Representing County of Dufferin

**Dr. Nicola Mercer (Ex-Officio Member)**

WDG Public Health, MOH & CEO  
Representing WDG Public Health

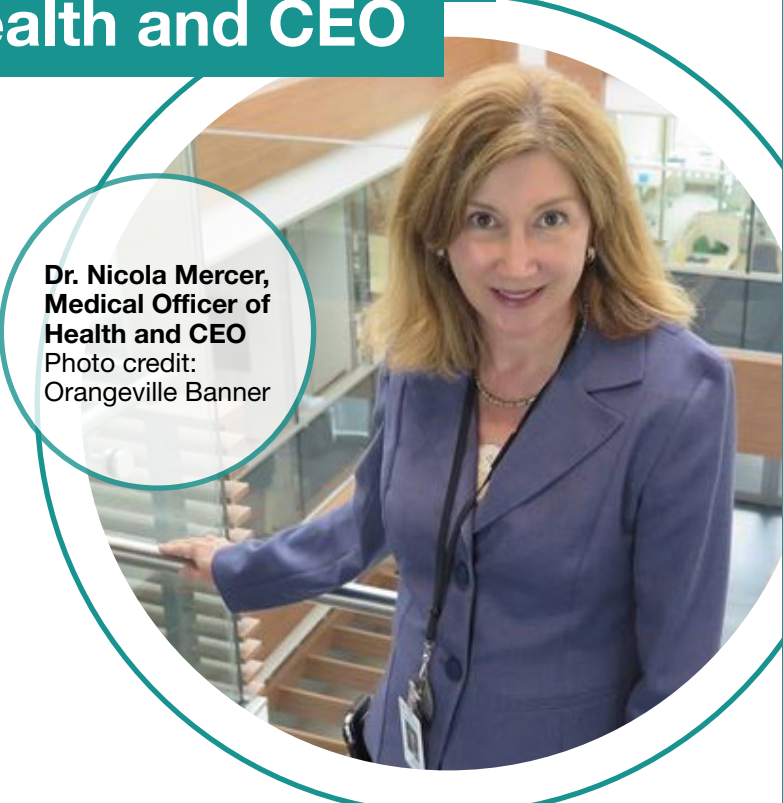


# Message from Dr. Nicola Mercer

## Medical Officer of Health and CEO

Looking back on 2020, which began as a relatively normal year for Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, seems to be a lifetime ago. While much of the work we expected did not happen, the agency did an extraordinary amount of work to protect the region against the threat of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Truly it was an exhausting year that tested the mettle of our team, but I am deeply proud of what we accomplished in service of the residents of our region.

**Dr. Nicola Mercer,  
Medical Officer of  
Health and CEO**  
Photo credit:  
Orangeville Banner



“ **Our communities continue to enrich our work and we look forward building upon this trust and partnership well into the future.** ”

Our work in 2020 was almost exclusively devoted to the response to COVID-19. By late January, we had entered our Incident Management System (IMS) structure, to more effectively respond to this local emergency. The early days of the pandemic were focused on prevention – ensuring public health measures were in place, with clear communication and support to reduce the impact and spread of the virus throughout the region. By the end of 2020, we had our first glimmer of hope that this pandemic would not last forever when we learned vaccines were on the horizon. This is where we would devote most of our energy in 2021.

While the work of 2020 felt immense at times, successes were present throughout the year. WDG Public Health embraced the work of the

pandemic beyond what could have been asked of them. We built robust collaborations with partners of every kind, from municipalities to health providers to businesses and community agencies and we listened and responded to our residents, providing frequent, transparent and up-to-date communication and evidence-based public health advice.

I am proud of the resilience of our community. As a region, we have shown ourselves leaders throughout this pandemic. I am grateful to every resident of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph for the part they played during this exceptional time. Our communities continue to enrich our work and we will continue building upon this trust and partnership well into the future. I look forward with real hope toward the end of this pandemic. ■

# Message from George Bridge

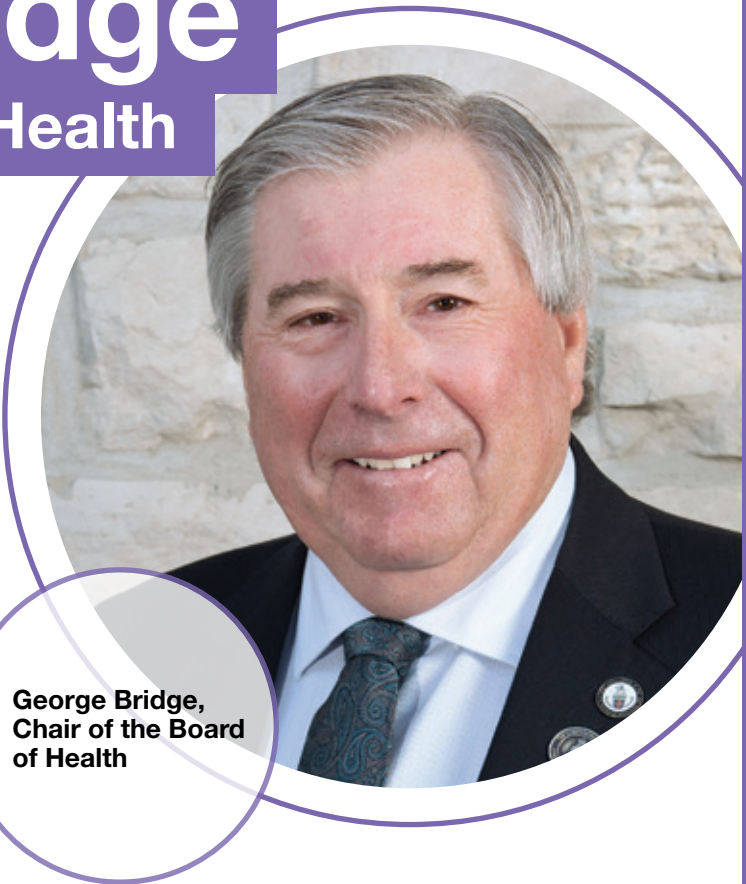
## Chair of the Board of Health

In my message from the Chair of the Board of Health last year, I spoke of 2019 being an eventful year. That trend certainly continued in 2020. As Chair, I continue to be proud of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health and the tremendous work the agency has done throughout this pandemic, working in collaboration with numerous partners throughout the region. This report is reflective of a year dedicated to the fight against COVID-19, but also begins to lay the foundation of the work of Public Health in the future.

“ Our role is grounded in a commitment to community well-being that is shared across the entire organization. ”

WDG Public Health has shown tremendous leadership through the pandemic, and throughout 2020 took many innovative steps to protect the region, including purchasing sub-zero freezers in advance of the vaccines arriving in the region, being at the forefront of masking requirements and building an in-house vaccine registration system. These decisions and the hard work involved happened early and better positioned WDG to come out of the pandemic together. These are just a few examples of WDG Public Health’s work that has been admired and emulated throughout Ontario.

WDG Public Health’s Board of Health is comprised of community members, municipal councillors and mayors who provide the oversight



George Bridge,  
Chair of the Board  
of Health

and support necessary for Public Health to serve our region. Our role is grounded in a commitment to community well-being that is shared across the entire organization.

The pandemic placed immense challenges on our region and our individual communities in 2020. This report highlights our collective response and our shared work in fighting COVID-19. This information will show where we’ve been, but also inform where we go next – getting back to a more normal way of life in a thriving Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph. ■



# Message from Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum

Associate Medical Officer of Health

The pandemic and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health's response to it have been, to use a word we have heard many times during this pandemic, unprecedented. Looking back on 2020, I am struck by how much we did not know about COVID-19 and how much we learned over the course the first year of the pandemic. The success of WDG Public Health's response to the pandemic reflects a deep commitment to learning, whether that was building our understanding of the virus as research became available around the globe, or learning and improving our response to the pandemic here in the region.

That ongoing, collective learning has been an important part of our work as we tackled the complexities of a new disease. Our team drew on and analyzed massive amounts of data, and we also listened to partners and members of the community to ensure we were using the best information available to provide a response to the pandemic grounded in health equity and appropriate for our unique local population.

“ I am confident that Public Health's culture of learning and willingness to adapt positions us well looking forward.

Being willing to learn and change was a key part of our ability to protect the region and continue our march toward ending the pandemic. Working



**Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum,  
Associate Medical  
Officer of Health**

with our many partners, Public Health tried, at all times, to be agile and make changes to suit the evolving needs of our community and our emerging understanding of COVID-19. This has helped us be ahead of the curve in decision-making throughout the course of the pandemic.

I am confident that Public Health's culture of learning, and willingness to adapt, positions us well looking forward. We don't yet know when the end of the pandemic will come or what it might look like, so that flexibility remains vital to supporting our community. ■



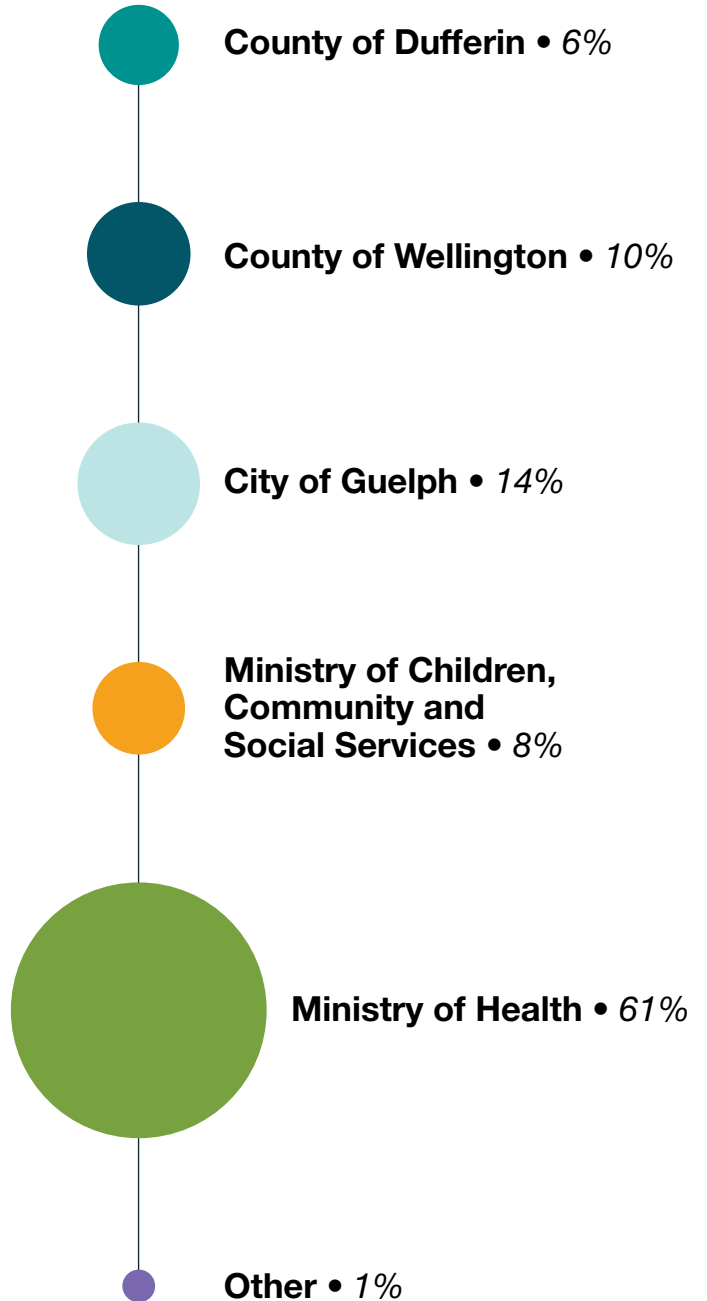
# Funding

The 2020 total operating budget for Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health was \$31,015,019.

Public Health receives funding from multiple sources:

- The Province of Ontario provides funding through the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. In 2020, The Province of Ontario provided funding for 69 percent of the total operating budget.
- The municipalities of Wellington, Dufferin and Guelph provide funding based on the population of each municipality relative to the total population of the region. Population numbers are determined by the most recent Census. In 2020, the County of Wellington contributed 10 percent of the total operating budget, the County of Dufferin contributed 6 percent and the City of Guelph contributed 14 percent.

As a publicly funded organization, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health reports under the accounting standards of the Public Sector Accounting Board. The financial statements are subject to an audit by an external audit firm as outlined in *The Municipal Act*. The full audited financial statements for the year can be found at [wdgpublichealth.ca](http://wdgpublichealth.ca). ■



# Stories of WDG Public Health's COVID-19 response in 2020



# Proactive protection of our communities

In late 2019, a novel respiratory virus was discovered halfway around the globe and health agencies worldwide began to brace themselves for what would happen next. Here in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph, our community had been planning for this type of emergency for decades.

**W**ellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health is required to be prepared to effectively and efficiently respond to any health emergencies that occur within the agency or the community as per the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*.

WDG Public Health maintains an up-to-date Emergency Response Plan (ERP) as part of this requirement. This plan outlines the roles of WDG Public Health, community partners and the province in the event of several types of emergencies. It includes relevant and comprehensive plans related to crisis communications, outbreak management and mass vaccination.

The ERP also provides details regarding the Incident Management System (IMS); the tool that WDG Public Health, the Ministry of Health and various other agencies use to respond to internal and external events that require immediate reordering of daily priorities and deployment of human or material resources. The desired outcomes of IMS are:

- To provide a safe working environment for staff involved in controlling the incident.
- To minimize the impact on the community and the environment.
- To effectively and efficiently control the incident.

The basic IMS structure includes areas such as operations, logistics, planning, administration, communications, liaison and safety (Figure 1). If one area is not needed, then it is not used. If another area is in high demand, then additional teams and groups can be added under that section.

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#### Previous IMS incidents:

- 2020: An infection control lapse at a local personal services setting establishment.
- 2018: Mass influenza vaccination initiative.
- 2017: Infection control lapse at a local dental practice.

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Prior to the activation of IMS, all WDG Public Health managers and a number of staff were trained in using the IMS structure. The agency has used the IMS structure to respond to various emergencies in the past. These experiences helped the organization to hone its ability to effectively respond to a crisis and provided practical experience to employees.

The strength of an IMS approach is that it is flexible and can be scaled up or down as a situation develops. WDG Public Health's response to COVID-19 in 2020 began with a small



## Basic IMS Structure

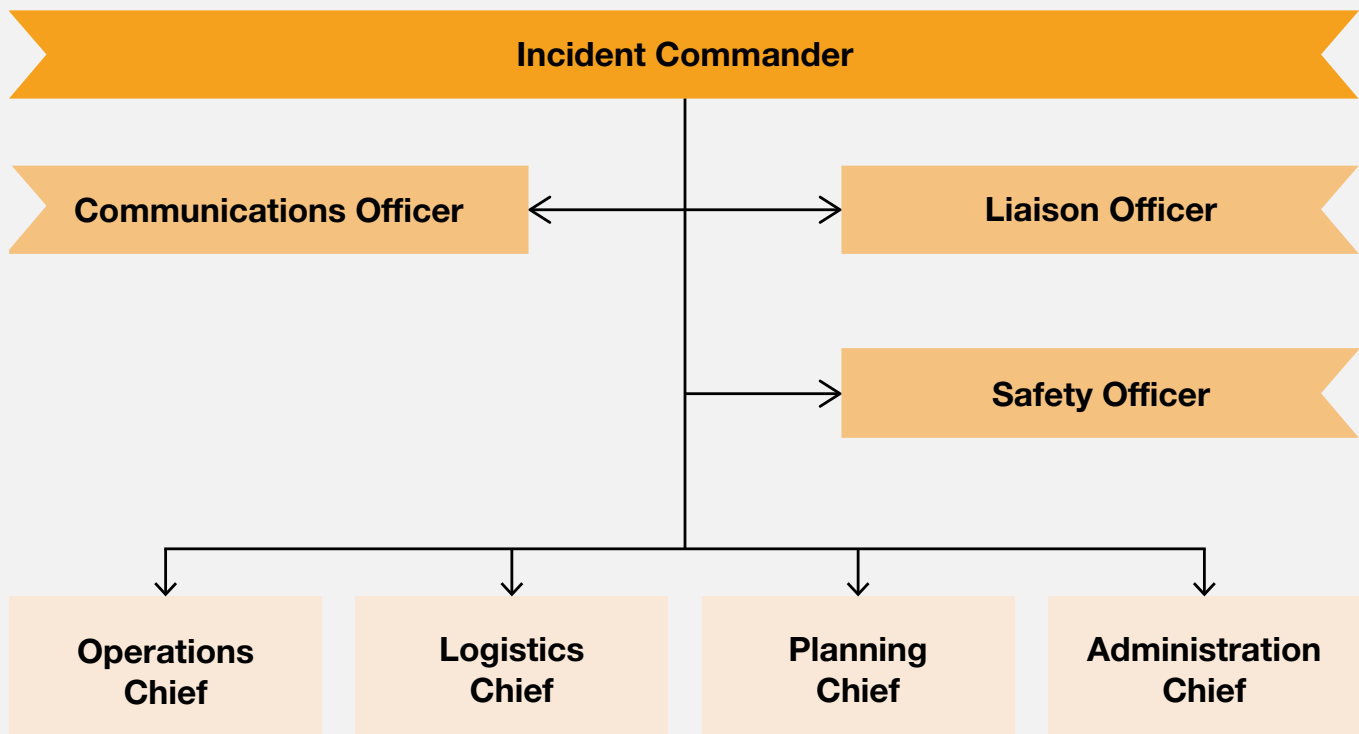


Figure 1: Basic IMS structure

team of senior leaders but quickly ramped up to meet the needs of the situation until nearly every employee was involved.

The ERP states that one of WDG Public Health’s roles is to “collaborate with community partners and stakeholders to work toward identifying commonalities and partnerships that could be used to enhance planning and response where possible.” WDG Public Health has participated in regular emergency preparedness simulations with its municipal partners over the past several years. In early 2020, the agency began connecting with municipals partners to discuss plans for the community’s response to COVID-19.

Planning and preparation was a key function of WDG Public Health’s response to COVID-19 throughout 2020 as we learned more about the virus and how the agency’s role would evolve in areas such as case management and vaccination. ■

# The first wave

WDG Public Health was actively preparing, monitoring and coordinating to respond to the novel coronavirus since the beginning of 2020 when it was first emerging on the other side of the world.

**W**ellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health activated the Incident Management System (IMS) on January 28, 2020 to activate protocols to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus - later named COVID-19. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020; the first local case was confirmed on March 16, 2020; and a province-wide state of emergency for Ontario was declared on March 17, 2020. These key events, plus the increase in cases, signaled the beginning of the first wave (Figure 2).

To focus resources on COVID-19 response and essential public health functions, all other programs and services were reduced, put on hold or adapted. WDG Public Health provided leadership to community partners like our municipalities, hospitals, schools, community partners, businesses and other local

organizations while ensuring the public had reliable and up-to-date information.

Initially, COVID-19 was associated with travel and WDG Public Health shared information to help people returning from countries that had outbreaks of the illness to know what to do if they develop symptoms. A COVID-19 call centre was set up to provide an access point for questions and it had three dedicated lines - one for health care providers, one for general COVID-19 questions and one for COVID-19 health advice and exposures. In addition, WDG Public Health leaders, liaisons and inspectors helped disseminate information to community partners, stakeholders and businesses.

WDG Public Health also worked in collaboration with the health care system including hospitals and primary care that led the development



Figure 2: Timeline of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

and implementation of testing and assessment centres. During the first wave when medical supplies were difficult to source, WDG Public Health worked with the community to gather and donate personal protective equipment to partners across the region including:

- Over 6,000 disposable gloves,
- Over 3,500 N95 masks,
- 350 surgical masks,
- 600 isolation gowns,
- and 600 face shields.

Throughout the first wave, WDG Public Health provided emerging COVID-19 information and support to our communities and this helped our region successfully “flatten the curve” of the first wave of COVID-19. Following the first wave, WDG Public Health continued to provide guidance and support to all sectors in our region during the reopening and used the knowledge gained about COVID-19 to prepare for future waves.■

### Medical supplies donated:



**6,000+**  
disposable gloves



**3,500+**  
N95 masks



**350**  
surgical masks



**600**  
isolation gowns



**600**  
face shields





# The impact of case and contact management

When an individual in Wellington County, Dufferin County or Guelph tests positive for COVID-19, quick and thorough follow-up on close contacts must be carried out. Case and contact management (CCM) is a core function of public health during the pandemic, as it plays a key role in preventing the spread of the virus.

**W**ellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health staff help slow the spread of COVID-19 in the community by investigating where an individual may have acquired the virus. Once testing is complete, WDG Public Health receives the results from the provincial lab and results are also made available online to individuals. WDG Public Health contacts those who test positive within 24 hours to begin the investigation process.

The nurse asks questions about the person's health and symptoms to ensure they get appropriate health care for their situation and then asks about their activities, locations, and contacts in the past 14 days to determine how they got the virus. To stop the transmission of infection, the person is instructed to self-isolate and WDG Public Health nurses follow up regularly.

The investigation continues by identifying all those who may have been in close contact with the positive case while they were infectious. These contacts will also be contacted and are

provided with instructions based on if they are a high-risk or low-risk contact, which may include testing, isolation and/or self-monitoring for symptoms (Figure 3).

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease and one case can develop into an outbreak very quickly if proper CCM is not completed promptly. In the case of an outbreak or if there is a risk to the public but there is no way to know every possible contact, WDG Public Health may issue a media release with exposure location details and instructions.

Throughout the pandemic, WDG Public Health has worked to balance CCM staffing to effectively manage the local caseload as cases rose and fell. During the first wave, WDG Public Health hired and trained dozens of new CCM nurses to work alongside current public health nurses and staff. The CCM team strived to reach 100 percent of close contacts within 24 hours, but at times, the case load was too great and adjustments had

## How self-isolation helps stop the spread

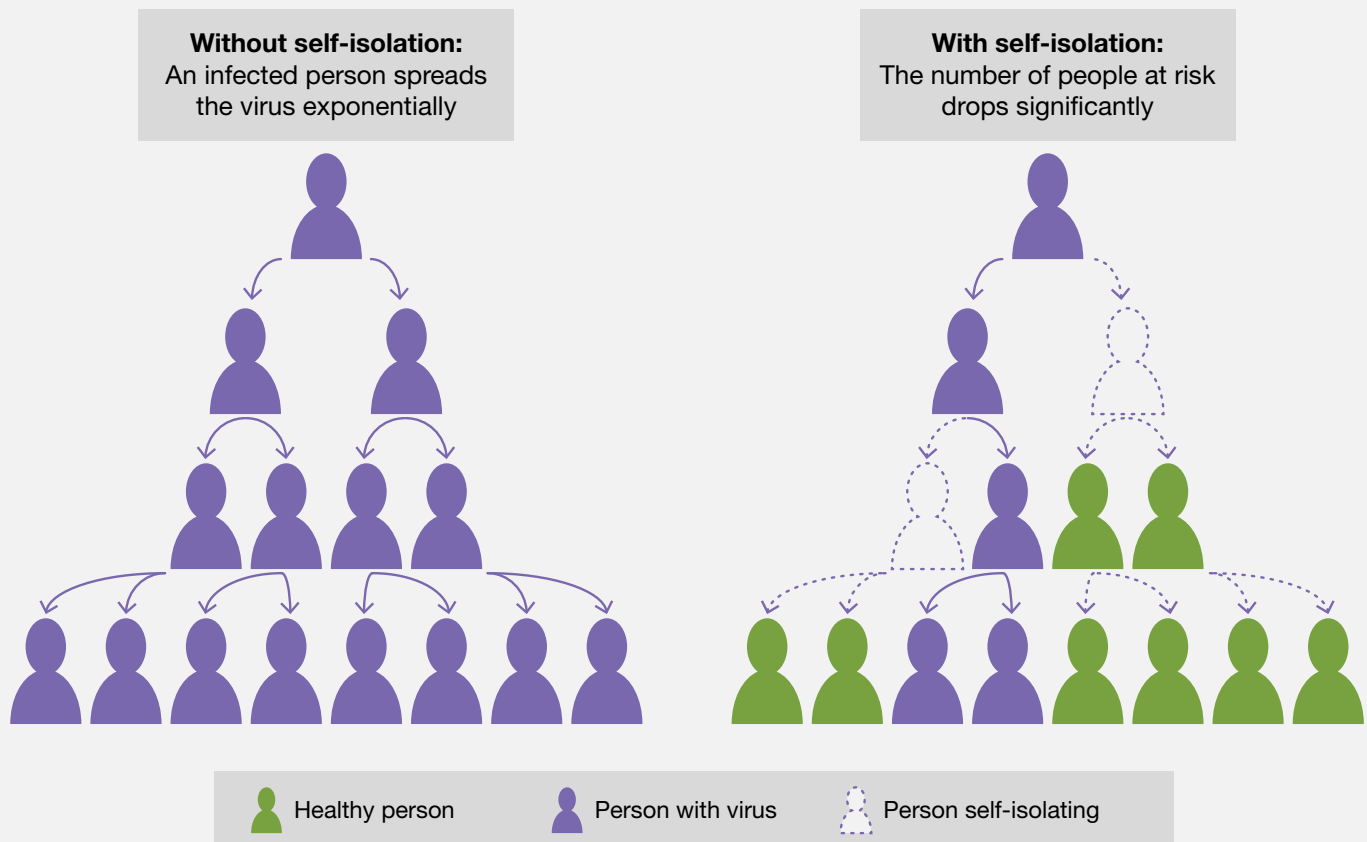


Figure 3: The number of people at risk of infection drops significantly when confirmed cases isolate.

to be made to prioritize higher risk cases and contacts (i.e. in schools and workplaces).

Case and contact management data is continuously analyzed by the Medical Officer of Health and other decision-makers. The trends from CCM data help inform decisions about the risk to the community and the healthcare system and appropriate public health measures or other actions needed.

CCM is one of the most important public health function to contain the spread of new diseases like COVID-19. When positive cases are isolated, the chain of transmission is broken, resulting in fewer cases and safer communities. ■

# Infection prevention is the best medicine

We have all heard that the best way to prevent infection is to clean our hands – with soap and water whenever possible or with hand sanitizer. This one small action as part of our daily routine can reduce the risk of catching a cold, flu, other respiratory virus or gastrointestinal illness. Cleaning our hands also helps prevent spreading germs and viruses to others.

**I**nfection prevention is not a new concept. It is an essential part of healthcare settings and is a key component in public health prevention, promotion, and practice. Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health works with inspected settings, community partners and service providers to increase awareness and education about infection prevention and control practices to keep people safe from infectious diseases.

During 2020, WDG Public Health increased communications to our communities, workplaces and living spaces to promote education and awareness of infection prevention measures. With an emerging disease like COVID-19, prevention is the best medicine.

WDG Public Health also worked to build awareness with the public and workplaces of infection prevention measures that are common in healthcare settings such as cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched objects and surfaces (i.e. door handles, light switches, debit machines, phones and computers); respiratory etiquette like covering your coughs or sneezes with a tissue, your sleeve or your arm; and

## Five infection prevention steps that help slow the spread of COVID-19:



**Washing hands or using hand sanitizer often**



**Avoiding touching your face**



**Wearing a mask**



**Staying home when sick**



**Physical distancing of two metres from others**

wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) when recommended.

During COVID-19, infection prevention measures worked. They helped to protect ourselves, our families and our communities by slowing the spread of COVID-19. Community transmission is an important determinant of public safety, and infection prevention measures help keep us all safer. ■



# Data and the fight against COVID-19

Data analytics has played a vital role throughout the pandemic on a local, national and international scale. The public demand for information and the use of data by epidemiologists and data scientists paved the way for unprecedented data collaboration and analysis to gain insights on fighting COVID-19.

**I**n Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, a data and surveillance team was set up early in the pandemic as part of the incident management system (IMS) response. In January 2020, the team began monitoring data sources like the John Hopkins interactive map, preprint archives, peer-reviewed science journals and data from other health protection agencies. With these data, the surveillance team developed and began distributing a COVID-19 situational report, the first of its kind in Ontario. The report was shared with WDG Public Health's IMS Command Table, the senior leadership team, the Ministry of Health and other public health units. It was also made public on the WDG Public Health website for anyone to access and view.

By the end of March 2020, WDG Public Health began publishing COVID-19 case data on the public website to give residents a better understanding of COVID-19 in our communities. What started as limited case data entered manually quickly developed into sophisticated data sharing, collaboration and visualizations. The quality and access to case data has continued to improve throughout the pandemic - as more data became available and as the COVID-19 situation

evolved, the cases dashboard continued to be enhanced. In addition to data that is reported publicly, public health also works with more detailed and private COVID-19 data on internal dashboards that helps inform our pandemic response and advice.

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**All of these data taken together has helped fight the COVID-19 pandemic in three key ways:**

## 01 Informing public health's response

To help fight COVID-19, public health leaders and government decision-makers need to make evidence-informed decisions quickly and decisively to reduce the spread and keep people safe and healthy. WDG Public Health used data to allocate limited public health resources, determine appropriate actions to take to keep people safe, inform communications and awareness campaigns and target outbreaks or clusters of cases.

02

### Increasing transparency, communication and trust

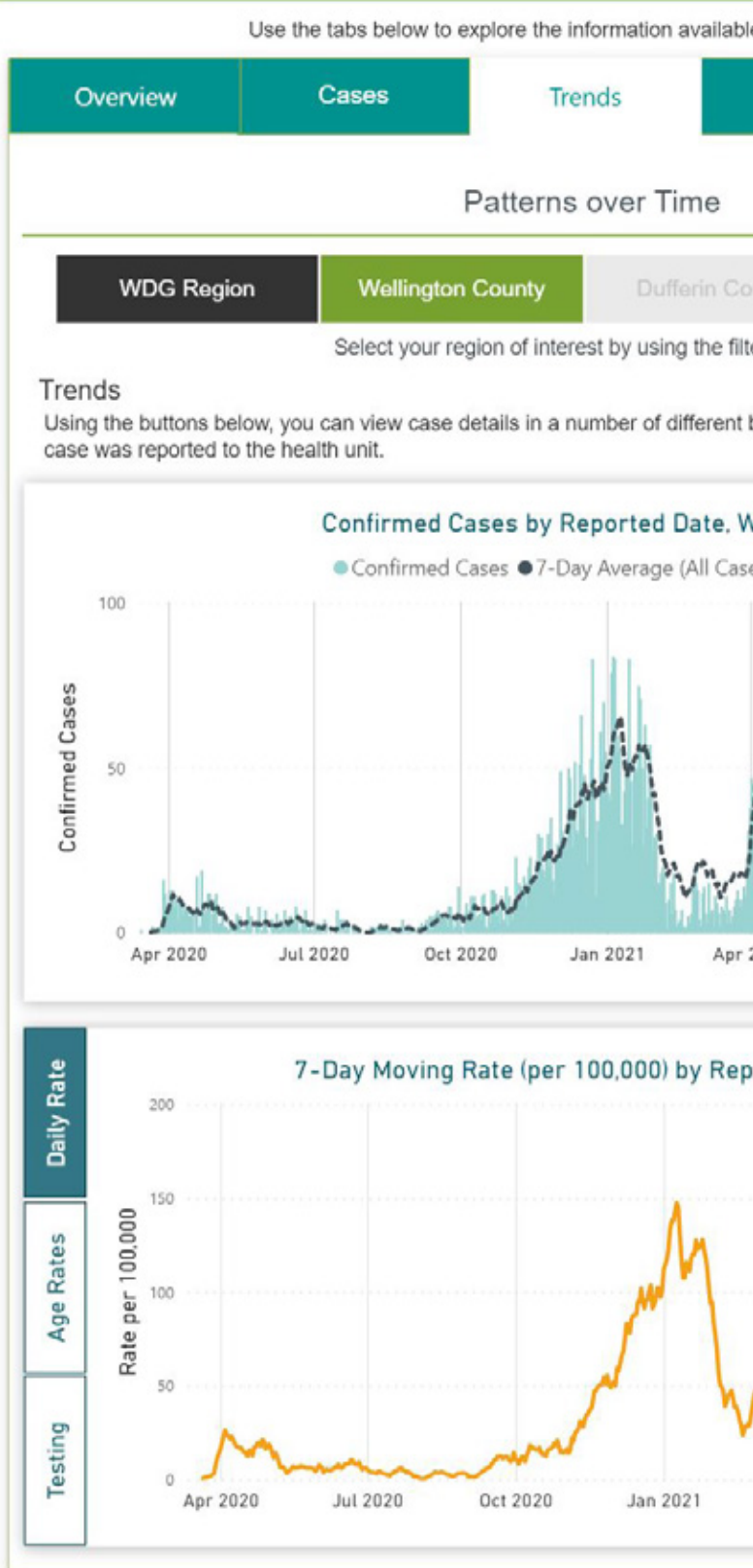
Disinformation about the pandemic increased exponentially in 2020 as governments and public health responded. In the beginning, when the healthcare system was not prepared for a surge in COVID-19 patients due to lack of supplies and life-saving medical equipment, and before widespread testing was available, it was especially important for the public to trust in the government response and in public health measures. Not only did the data help inform decisions, but it also helped the public understand why those decisions were being made. This transparency has ensured WDG Public Health was seen as a trusted source of reliable and accurate COVID-19 information throughout the pandemic.

03

### Identifying the most vulnerable communities or populations

Public Health monitors and assesses local epidemiology to determine where COVID-19 cases, transmission risks and outbreaks are happening or most likely to happen based on previous patterns. In 2020, WDG Public Health used the data to determine where to target testing initiatives (for instance testing all residents of a particular living space or all employees of a workspace), what type of communications and awareness might be needed and determine which community partners to connect with to ensure public safety.

Data has been integral in the fight against COVID-19. Despite ongoing data challenges and limitations, WDG Public Health was able to develop data systems for our local needs and community, ensuring our response to the quickly changing COVID-19 situation was nimble and effective. ■



# WDG Public Health leads the way on mandatory masking

Before COVID-19, venturing out to a store, taking our children to school or visiting with family and friends was a normal part of our daily lives.

**W**ith the arrival of COVID-19, daily routines were replaced with new habits to ensure everyone in the community stayed as safe as possible. Infection prevention measures like physical distancing, washing our hands frequently and not touching our face were the most effective ways to prevent the virus from spreading.

In the summer of 2020 as Ontario moved past the first wave and onto the next stages of reopening, restrictions began to lift, businesses were inviting customers inside again and larger gatherings were allowed. But COVID-19 was still in our communities and in Ontario so staying safe and reducing transmission was top of mind for Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health.

While new information about the COVID-19 virus and how it spreads was emerging, there was a patchwork of masking recommendations around the world. In many countries, people have a long history of embracing mask-wearing to protect others, and began wearing masks immediately upon hearing of an emerging respiratory virus. But it took other countries like Canada, where masks are not as normalized, longer to embrace the use of them as another layer of protection.

Public health agencies in Canada were monitoring the latest evidence that the virus could be transmitted before infected people began to show symptoms. This, along with the evidence that wearing face coverings protects others from our respiratory droplets, resulted in the recommendation from Dr. Teresa Tam, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, recommending that Canadians should wear a mask to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

While the change to recommend masks was an important step, this recommendation alone was not enough to normalize masking for Canadians. To protect residents in our area, WDG Public Health's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Nicola Mercer, issued the first mask mandate in Canada in June of 2020, requiring the mandatory wearing of masks by anyone entering a commercial establishment. Under Section 22 of the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, a medical officer of health can issue an order to "require a person to take or to refrain from taking any action in respect of a communicable disease."

The vast majority of people and businesses embraced wearing masks and we are still using

them as a layer of protection today. As evidence continues to grow showing the effectiveness of masks, we are also learning more about the types of masks that provide the best protection and recommendations have been updated.

Dr. Mercer's decision to mandate wearing masks paved the way for regions throughout Ontario and across Canada to follow suit in the weeks and months that followed. WDG Public Health's Section 22 Order also helped normalize masking in our region - a simple step almost everyone can do to help protect each other from the virus. ■





# Safe reopening of schools

Supporting the safe reopening of schools for the 2020-21 school year was the largest single program focus for Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health's COVID-19 response.

**S**chool boards were committed to being creative and flexible in their approach to protecting the school community and effective strategies were developed.

**WDG Public Health kept schools safe in the following key areas:**

## 01 Keeping community transmission low

Protecting students and staff when schools reopened for in-person learning was the utmost priority and we all had a part to play in this responsibility. The lower the number of infections in the general community, the less likely the virus could get into schools. WDG Public Health worked with community partners to share public health measures and infection prevention messaging to increase awareness and encourage community cooperation to keep COVID-19 out of schools.

## 02 Developing COVID-19-safe strategies

WDG Public Health worked with school boards and private schools to help prepare their safety plans including guidance for physical distancing, masks, infection prevention measures, personal protective equipment, protocols for symptomatic staff or students, enhanced cleaning, cohorting



and case and contact management protocols. This work helped inform reopening plans to keep students and staff safe on the bus, at arrival and departure, in-class and during activities and breaks.

### 03 **Creating a dedicated school health team**

Public Health created a dedicated school health team prior to the reopening of schools that was made up of more than 20 staff and nurses and a school liaison. This team served as an educational resource for teachers, staff and students on COVID-19 safety measures and provided up-to-date communications between WDG Public Health and schools.

### 04 **Coordinating case and contact management**

To keep schools safe it was imperative to quickly and effectively contact, test and isolate (if necessary) COVID-19 cases in the school community. WDG Public Health staff worked with principals to obtain seating plans and bus information, assess close contacts, determine who would be required to isolate and communicate to affected students and staff with instructions. This ensured case and contact management was aligned throughout the school system and community for effective contact tracing and isolation.

Plans to safely reopen our schools depended largely on our commitment as a community to tackling COVID-19 together and WDG Public Health was confident that everyone was working with the safety of our children and school staff as the utmost priority. ■



# Empowering workplaces and living spaces in slowing the spread

The pandemic affected workplaces and living spaces in a significant way from staff to patrons to residents of congregate settings. These settings within our communities continue to be an important part of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health's COVID-19 response.

**E**arly in the pandemic, WDG Public Health developed a liaison team to provide outreach, up-to-date COVID-19 information and support to various types of workplaces and living spaces, as well as provide a point of contact for any questions or concerns. As part of WDG Public Health's emergency response plan, the liaison team developed a COVID-19 Stakeholder Bulletin that has been published twice a week since the beginning of the pandemic. With COVID-19 information changing rapidly, this bulletin helped summarize important information from various sources including the Ontario Ministry of Health, the Public Health Agency of Canada and WDG Public Health and share it with workplaces, living spaces and other community stakeholders.

Living spaces like long-term care homes (LTCH) and retirement homes (RH) were among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada

and Ontario making it vitally important they get support. To assist LTCH and RH with fighting and preventing COVID-19, WDG Public Health nurses and staff helped coordinate widespread testing of staff and residents, communicated test results as they came in, supported outbreak response and management and provided infection prevention and control information and education. Liaisons shared information from the Ministry directly to LTCH and RH and to a dedicated section of the WDG Public Health website while prioritizing responding to questions and providing appropriate resources. Support was also provided to other congregate living settings such as shelters and group homes, to help protect their residents from COVID-19.

WDG Public Health worked to support workplaces and businesses by helping navigate changing COVID-19 requirements and public health measures and providing resources to make





implementing public health measures easier (i.e. distancing floor decals, mask posters, forms, guidance documents). Prior to the pandemic, WDG Public Health had a working relationship with many workplace settings through public health inspections and this role continued, with the addition of providing support with new and changing public health regulations and mandates. Inspectors also collaborated with municipal law enforcement and bylaw on enforcement of COVID-19 requirements and responding to complaints. Coordination and communication with other health units also helped ensure consistent interpretation of the regulations across neighbouring health unit regions.

Workplaces and living spaces in our community worked diligently to help slow the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. They faced ongoing challenges and setbacks but continued to pivot, adapt and move forward and played an important role in fighting COVID-19 locally. ■



# The flu season that never was

The 2020-21 flu season was like no other. Leading up to the flu season, experts were closely monitoring flu transmission, strains and vaccine uptake in Australia, to help inform decisions for the flu season in Canada.

**I**n 2020, Australia had the highest ever rates of flu vaccine uptake. High flu shot uptake, in combination with other public health measures put in place to control the spread of COVID-19 (i.e., frequent handwashing, physical distancing and masks), resulted in their mildest flu season in recent history. There was good reason to expect that if flu shot uptake was as successful here, along with careful adherence to COVID-19 public health measures, we could also expect a mild flu season.

Influenza, or the flu, and COVID-19 are both contagious, respiratory illnesses that may present with similar symptoms (in some cases) but are caused by different viruses. They both spread in similar ways through droplets or virus particles being inhaled or from touching infected surfaces and then touching your face. You can be infected for days with the flu or the virus that causes COVID-19 and spread these viruses to others before starting to feel sick. Antibiotics are not an option and getting vaccinated is the best prevention.

If there is one thing the pandemic taught us, it's what life is like without a vaccine for a highly infectious, and in some cases, deadly, virus. This has fostered a greater appreciation for the critical role vaccines play in the health of families, communities and economies, worldwide.

Without a vaccine for COVID-19 readily available in 2020, it was more important than ever to get the flu shot to reduce your chances of getting sick with the flu and possibly getting COVID-19 at the same time. Simply put, the flu shot is your best defense against the flu.

Everyone six months and older should get a flu shot. It protects you if you are exposed to the influenza virus and may prevent you from getting very sick. You are also less likely to spread the flu virus so your flu shot protects people close to you, which is important as some people are at higher risk of serious complications if they get the flu. Getting your flu shot is also an important way to help keep our health care system intact during the pandemic by decreasing flu-related hospitalizations and emergency room visits.

Demand for the flu shot in 2020 was approximately three times higher than in 2019 thanks to increased awareness of vaccines, infection prevention and protecting the health care system. By the end of the 2020-21 flu season, only 27 cases were reported for all of Ontario and there was no evidence of community spread of influenza in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph with no confirmed cases – a COVID-19 silver lining. ■



# Racism as a public health issue

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the issue of racial health inequities to the forefront as we witnessed the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 had on indigenous and racialized communities in Ontario.

**W**hile racism can be observed in the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of individuals or groups, it can also be embedded into societal institutions in ways that may be less visible. For example, racism is visible in institutions through racial profiling and racist hiring and promotion practices. At the community level, these two factors have affected where people can afford to live, resulting in residential segregation, a root cause of racial disparity in health today.

People that experience systemic racism are more likely to also experience higher rates of poverty, precarious and underemployment, and systemic disadvantages within housing, education, and public health systems. People who experience racism are more likely to have negative mental health outcomes, negative physical health outcomes (i.e. hypertension, low birth weight, heart disease and diabetes) and negative health-related behaviours (i.e. cigarette

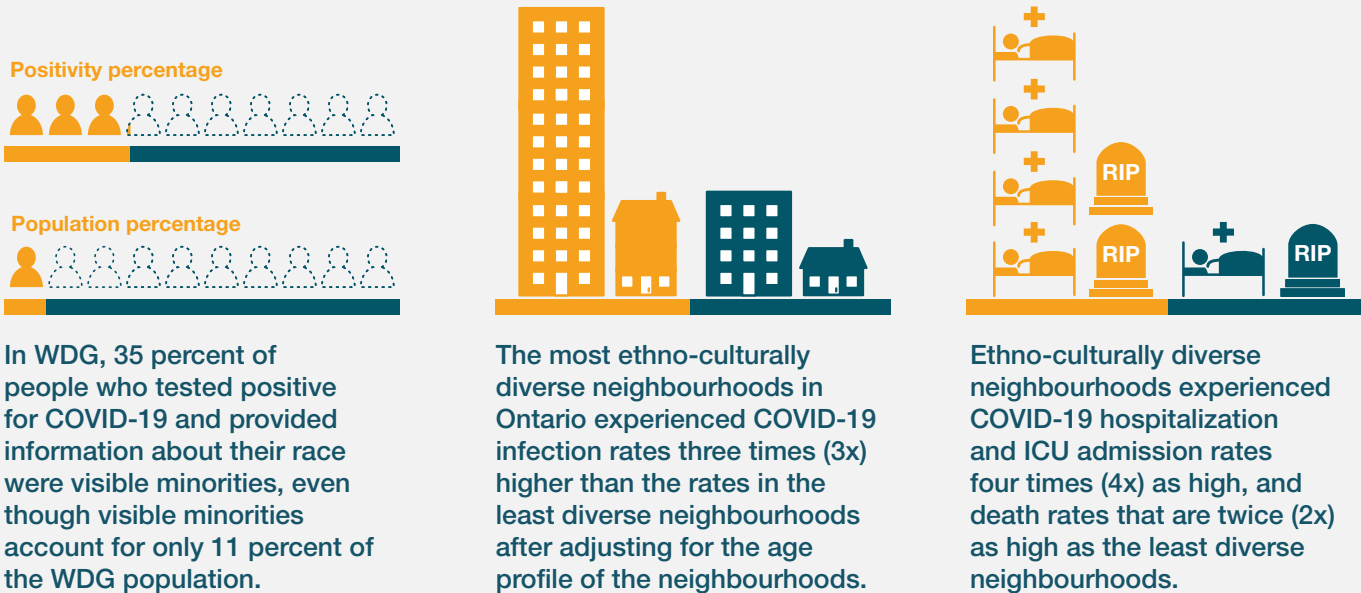


Figure 4: Racial health inequalities brought to light during the 2020 pandemic.

smoking, alcohol and substance use). The socioeconomic and political context attached to race, the social hierarchies assigned to different races, and the racism faced by different groups impact individuals' opportunities for health and wellbeing.

WDG Public Health is committed to anti-racism work through learning and action. To advance our understanding and initial actions to address racism as a public health issue,

WDG Public Health is taking steps in engaging with local leaders, organizations and individuals in indigenous and racialized communities to understand the local experience of racism as a public health issue, how it can be addressed, and find opportunities for alignment and collaboration. We are also committed to the surveillance, analysis and reporting of racial health inequities in our region to identify where there are gaps and take action where needed.■



# Planning for the largest vaccination campaign in history

The planning process for the largest vaccination campaign in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health's history got underway months before the first COVID-19 vaccine was administered.

**S**tarting in the summer of 2020, preliminary discussions about how to adapt vaccination models from past student immunizations and flu clinics began. Next, a vaccine rollout committee was formed to formalize the planning process. The goals of WDG Public Health's mass vaccination plan were to ensure a COVID-19 vaccine would be available to every eligible resident and to have the capacity to administer the vaccines as quickly as supply allowed.

**Developing a plan of this size was a coordinated effort that involved five key areas:**

## 01 Vaccine Storage and Handling

To ensure that our region would be well supplied with vaccine when it arrived, WDG Public Health purchased two Thermo Scientific purpose-built ultra-low temperature freezers in the summer of 2020 that could achieve the  $-70^{\circ}\text{C}\pm 10^{\circ}\text{C}$  temperatures needed to store the mRNA vaccines. This planning resulted in WDG Public Health being selected as one of only two public health units in Ontario to store



COVID-19 vaccine freezer at WDG Public Health.



the COVID-19 vaccines in their facilities while the rest of the province used local hospital facilities for storage.

## 02 Vaccine Security

With these ultra-low freezers, WDG Public Health offices in Guelph and Orangeville became the sole COVID-19 vaccine storage locations for our region, making vaccine security a top priority. Even prior to the pandemic, millions of dollars' worth of vaccines were stored at any one time and WDG Public Health had monitoring, alarm systems and surveillance protections in place. For the COVID-19 vaccines, the new freezers were purchased with security in mind. Security features included hard-wiring into the wall so the plug cannot be removed, on-site and remote monitoring in real-time with alarms and a backup generator. In addition, WDG Public Health planned for additional monitoring and security at its offices entrances and exits including doors being locked 24/7.

## 03 Supplies

Purchasing the right supplies early was another important step in preparing for the vaccination campaign. Many lessons were learned early in the pandemic during supply shortages and WDG Public Health's vaccine plan ensured critical supplies like personal protective equipment (i.e. masks, face shields, goggles, gloves, etc.), syringes of varying sizes, hand sanitizer and disinfectants were purchased in large quantities for upcoming mass vaccination clinics.

## 04 Sites and staffing

Part of the planning process was finding suitable mass vaccination sites and facilities throughout our communities, as well as healthcare professionals and support staff to run the clinics and administer vaccines. The plan involved working together with large and small partners and organizations throughout our urban and rural communities.



*Vanessa and Susanne, Vaccine Medication Coordinators, pictured with WDG Public Health's ultra-low temperature vaccine freezer.*

Extensive training was planned and prepared for clinic staff including handling and administering the COVID-19 vaccines and learning the programs used in the registration and record-keeping process.

## 05 Prioritized Population Planning

The Ministry of Health was developing a province-wide prioritization framework, however, because it was anticipated that vaccines would be in low supply during the initial rollout, WDG Public Health worked to prioritize the highest risk populations and settings. This background work would be imperative in rolling out the vaccine quickly to protect the most vulnerable in the highest risk settings first.

While WDG Public Health was planning for the vaccine to come to our region, Health Canada was in the process of reviewing submissions for COVID-19 vaccines. It was announced on December 9, 2020 that Pfizer-BioNTech was authorized for use in Canada for people 16 years of age and older. With this news, the vaccination plan would move into its next phase of beginning to immunize the residents of our region starting in 2021. ■

# Community thank you

Reflecting on the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no doubt it was extremely difficult. It put considerable strain on each of us, our families, our friends, our work and our community. It challenged all of us in ways that most of us have never experienced in our lifetimes.

Supporting our community in this global crisis was at the heart of everything Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health did during the first year of the pandemic, and we know we asked a lot of you. We asked you to stay home, stay away from family and friends, change your daily routines and adopt new 'normals' when out in public. Specifically, in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph, we asked you to be leaders in the community and be the first public health region in Ontario to wear masks. Please know, we did not make any of those decisions and recommendations lightly.

When we reflect on the devastating impacts this pandemic has had around the world, it's clear that as a community, we made great strides to keep ourselves and each other safe and we continue to move forward.

Thanks to the considerable efforts of our residents and many organizations throughout our communities working together, we continue to succeed in our fight against COVID-19. Thank you for everything you have done and continue to do to stay safe and stay well. ■





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