

2025 Chief Nursing Officer Report

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) has transitioned to a flexible, collaborative nursing workforce model that reduces silos and strengthens the agency's ability to respond to evolving public health demands.
- The Immunization Competency and Readiness Program (ICRP) has standardized immunization expertise across the nursing workforce, ensuring rapid surge capacity and sustained clinical readiness.
- Cross-trained Public Health Nurses (PHN's) enabled effective, coordinated responses to high-demand initiatives and outbreaks, including Immunization Schools Pupils Act (ISPA) and measles, while maintaining continuity of essential services.
- Continued investment in nursing education, preceptorship, and expanded roles is strengthening organizational resilience, workforce sustainability, and community trust.

Background

WDGPH employs 59 Registered Nurses working as PHNs in six program areas across two divisions. PHNs contribute to all public health activities and form the agency's largest professional group.

Historically, PHNs worked primarily within their designated program areas, with limited cross-team or cross-division collaboration. This changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when program activities were paused and teams reorganized, resulting in PHNs working collaboratively to meet the demands of the pandemic response.

Since the pandemic, WDGPH needed to adapt to evolving community needs and organizational changes. These shifts highlighted the importance of removing barriers between teams to foster effective collaboration and ensure a coordinated and efficient response to emerging needs and issues. As new staff join and nursing capacity expands, the agency has focused on addressing rising public health demands through strategic resource use.

The benefits of breaking down silos and enabling PHNs to work more flexibly have become clear, making these goals central to ongoing efforts. Flexibility and adaptability enable teams to pivot quickly during outbreaks and periods of high demand. Supporting one another across the agency ensures that knowledge, skills, and resources are shared effectively, maintaining continuity of care and upholding Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS).

Discussion

This report highlights the pivotal role of nursing actions and initiatives in driving this transformation.

Immunization Competency and Readiness Program (ICRP)

This program was developed and implemented in 2025 with the primary objectives of the program being:

- 1. Enhanced Immunization Competency** – Ensure all nurses gain and maintain proficiency in vaccine administration, particularly in times of surge demand.
- 2. Surge Capacity Readiness** – Equip the nursing workforce with the training and skills necessary for rapid deployment to areas requiring additional immunization support during emergencies, large-scale vaccination efforts, or emerging vaccine needs.
- 3. Sustainability** – Develop a system for continuous learning that supports long-term competence and readiness.

The program required all nurses to complete the Education Program for Immunization Competencies (EPIC), a program that provides a comprehensive overview of vaccines and their implementation and uses. By September 2025, all PHNs, apart from any newly hired staff currently completing the process, had successfully completed EPIC.

Additionally, any nurses with less experience in the clinical space were encouraged to participate in a session facilitated by a Vaccine Preventable Disease (VPD) PHN, and a Vaccine and Medication Administrator (VMA). The primary objective of this session was to enhance PHN competence regarding vaccine storage devices, clinic facilities, supply management, and sharps handling processes. Prior to attending these sessions, PHNs were required to complete cold chain training via the Learning Management System (LMS).

Looking ahead, the next steps for the ICRP include scheduling PHNs into immunization clinics to shadow VPD PHNs. This initiative is scheduled to commence in January 2026.

ISPA Response

During the Fall of 2024 and into 2025, WDGPH distributed approximately 10,000 notices to students identified as having overdue immunizations or incomplete records. The response was managed collaboratively through an Information Management System (IMS) and a unified team.

PHNs from various teams contributed as follows:

- Client Community Support (CCS) handled many calls from parents and physicians regarding the notices
- Children's Health Services (CHS) assisted CCS on the phone line
- Clinical Services (CS) added immunization clinics and supported calls
- PHNs from various teams joined the VPD team at schools to administer immunizations

Measles Outbreak Response

Measles outbreak was declared in WDG in March 2025. When the workload scaled beyond the Infectious Disease (ID) team, the Infection Control nurses and Community Health (CH) division assisted the ID team with their response. Nursing responses included:

- Lunch and learn event for PHNs that included:
 - Information about measles,
 - Post-exposure guidelines,
 - IPAC (Infection Prevention and Control) considerations,
 - A refresher on administering subcutaneous vaccines.
- CH Supervisors and managers developed a case and contact management tool for nurses to support case and contact management. Training was provided to PHNs without prior experience so they could assist the ID team in carrying out case and contact management (CCM) follow-ups.
- PHNs from different teams throughout the agency assisted by administering measles vaccines, conducting post-exposure management such as blood draws and immunizations, performing CCM and answering calls on the phone line.

Learnings from this response will be incorporated into an enhanced ongoing training program to ensure all nurses are prepared to participate in outbreak responses as necessary.

Office Nurse

Following the measles response, it was evident that assigning a dedicated nurse to each office brought significant advantages. With a nurse on site, community members could access support beyond what receptionists typically offer. To clarify this role, nursing managers and supervisors met to determine which tasks and types of support fall within or outside its scope, as well as to discuss effective ways to collect data and feedback for ongoing improvement.

So far, most walk-in clients have sought help with immunizations or sexual health concerns. All nurses in the agency are required to fulfill this role. In January 2026, additional training was provided to nurses on sexual health alongside the ICRP. Both initiatives aim to boost public health nurses' confidence in fulfilling the office nurse role.

Preceptorship & Nursing Students

In 2025, the agency welcomed six nursing students from the McMaster/Conestoga BScN program for placements within their final year. The cohort comprised two students in the Winter semester, one in Spring/Summer, and three in the Fall 2025 semester.

Feedback from both preceptors and students was predominantly positive. Notably, preceptors expressed appreciation for co-precepting arrangements, which enabled them to collaborate with fellow PHNs to effectively manage the responsibilities of student preceptorship. Students valued the opportunity to engage with two nurses, thereby gaining exposure to diverse skills and professional approaches. They also reported highly positive experiences at WDG, particularly enjoying the opportunity to shadow staff in other program areas, which broadened their understanding of public health operations.

Securing preceptor commitments remains a challenge due to existing program workload demands coupled with the additional responsibilities of teaching and supporting students. Nevertheless, the CNO is dedicated to advancing the preceptorship program at WDGPH, recognizing the mutual benefits it provides to both PHNs and nursing students.

Benefits of a Prepared Workforce

Building a prepared workforce of PHNs who are knowledgeable across a variety of areas creates a foundation for rapid, effective response during times of need. The initiatives outlined in this report, such as cross-training, expanding clinical competencies, and fostering adaptability equip nurses to step into diverse roles with confidence. This breadth of knowledge reduces reliance on siloed teams and ensures continuity of care when resources are stretched.

Continuous investment in education and leadership development enables nurses to effectively address evolving health challenges and support innovation in public health programs.

These efforts translate into tangible outcomes during emergencies:

- **Expedited reassignment of staff** to outbreak response is achievable, as nurses can transition between roles without requiring extensive retraining.
- **Reduced service gaps** during surges, as cross-trained nurses can cover immunization clinics, case management, and contact tracing simultaneously.
- **Improved coordination** across programs, enabling quicker decision-making and resource allocation during crises.
- **Enhanced community trust**, as timely and consistent responses reassure the public and maintain continuity of essential services.

Ultimately, these initiatives strengthen organizational resilience, enabling the agency to respond swiftly and collaboratively to public health demands while maintaining high standards of care.

Conclusion

In summary, the Chief Nursing Officer remains dedicated to enhancing the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of the nursing workforce. Beyond the initiatives previously outlined, the aim is to further advance preceptorship and mentorship programs, continually innovate services and programs in alignment with WDGPH's current strategic plan and consistently refine nursing practice. The commitment to ongoing education and professional development will continue in 2026, with many nurses recently completing Crisis Awareness and Response, Developmental Screening and Support Plan, and Harm Reduction training, as WDGPH continues to actively support growth among nurses and nurse leaders.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- Population Health Assessment
- Health Equity
- Effective Public Health Practice
- Emergency Management

Program Standards

- Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- Food Safety
- Healthy Environments
- Healthy Growth and Development
- Immunization
- Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- Safe Water
- School Health
- Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- Improve health outcomes
- Focus on children's health
- Build strong partnerships
- Innovate our programs and services
- Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system