

Empowering Health for All: Launching an E-Learning Environment

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

- WDG Public Health is introducing an online learning platform designed to streamline and enhance the educational experiences for health professionals and community members.
- The new mobile friendly online learning platform will improve accessibility for community members seeking to enhance their knowledge of various public health topics.
- Initial offerings include free courses on managing recreational pools and spas and personal service settings tailored to specific community and professional needs.
- The platform aims to enhance community support, improve health promotion, and facilitate data collection on health standards compliance for all WDG Public Health programs.
- The platform's design facilitates asynchronous learning, allowing users to engage with content at their own pace, which is especially beneficial for those in remote or underserved areas within WDG.

Background

Empowering people with public health tools and information is an essential component of public health. WDG Public Health (WDGPH) is launching a mobile friendly online e-learning environment that will significantly enhance public health education across the region. This initiative responds to the growing demand for educational options that are not only flexible but also widely accessible, aligning with the Agency's strategic objective to nurture a well-informed and proactive community.

This platform will enhance the accessibility of public health education delivered by WDGPH, enabling individuals from varied geographical and socio-economic backgrounds to access specific training at no cost. It will be used as a tool to supplement traditional in-person training and workshops, and, in some cases, replace the need for in-person training altogether. In June 2024, as part of the launch of the new learning platform, WDGPH will introduce two free courses designed to support Personal Service Settings (PSS) and Recreational Pools and Spas (RPS).

By introducing courses designed to fill training voids in key program areas, WDGPH promotes health by equipping individuals with the knowledge to help address and manage public health challenges effectively. Furthermore, the online environment incorporates data collection methodologies that will allow WDGPH to gather critical insights. This data will be instrumental in continuously refining course offerings and adapting to emerging health trends, thus fostering better health outcomes and improved regulatory compliance.

This project is one of many progressive steps taken by WDGPH to improve and streamline service delivery. This project supports current initiatives and lays the groundwork for future training and course development expansions. This approach opens new channels for community engagement by leveraging digital technology, broadening public health education's reach and impact. The online offers a flexible and scalable solution to deliver tailored educational content, from basic health literacy to advanced professional training.

Discussion

The new online learning environment is a critical strategic development in WDGPH's educational initiatives. By moving towards an asynchronous learning model, traditional educational barriers are removed, such as scheduling conflicts, costs, and travel limitations. Internally, resources traditionally used to host training workshops will be redistributed into other program needs. The platform is intuitive and user-friendly, ensuring all community members, regardless of technological proficiency, can benefit from the program. Courses are developed by public health and education experts, providing high-quality, impactful learning experiences free of charge. The first two courses have been identified by WDGPH to address gaps in training available to inform operators of recent regulatory changes to recreational water and personal service settings legislation.

Recreational Pools and Spas

The RPS course is designed to assist operators of recreational pools and spas in to meet the requirements set forth by *Ontario Regulation 565 Public Pools*. This comprehensive course provides easy-to-understand content for pool operators and lifeguards, ensuring they are well-prepared to safely maintain their facilities in compliance with the regulation. Over 120 recreational pools and spas undergo regular inspections by WDGPH; each facility inspected at least four times annually, or every three months of operation for seasonal facilities. Over the past five years, public health inspectors have carried out nearly 1500 inspections and investigations across these facilities (Figure 1). Despite the stable number of recreational water facilities, there has been a notable turnover in staffing, including lifeguards and maintenance personnel. There is an opportunity to standardized training through an online course, for new and returning seasonal workers. This approach ensures all operators are prepared to maintain high safety and operational standards of their facilities.

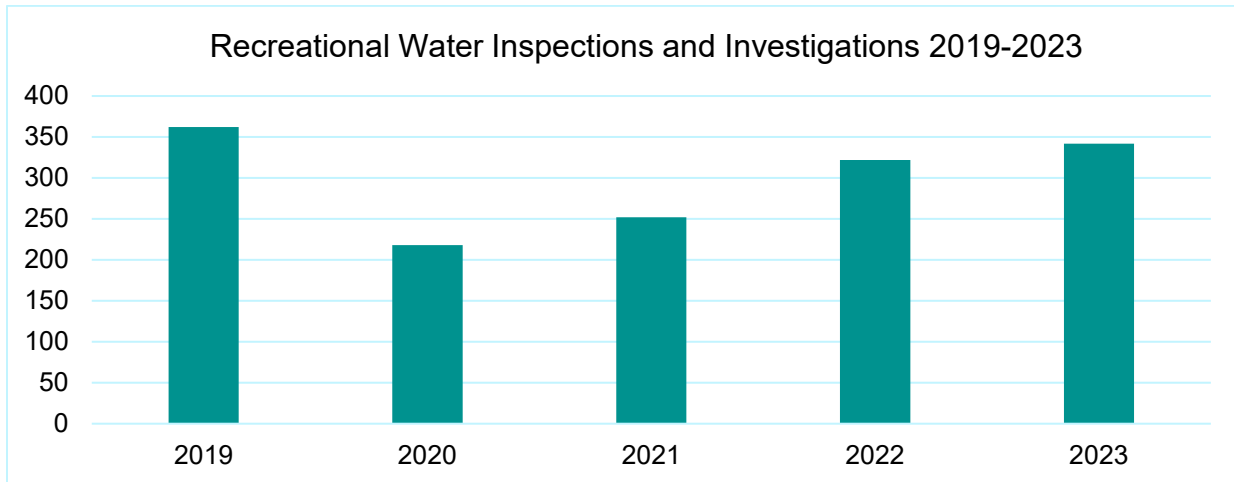


Figure 1 Total number of inspections and investigations in Recreational Water Facilities by year in WDG. Data retrieved from the Environmental Health Department. Note the reduction of inspections in 2020-2021 is due to COVID19 restrictions and closures.

Infraction data identified during inspections highlight a range of issues, from inadequate chemical water treatment levels to the absence of essential safety equipment, which should be readily accessible on-site. The online learning course has been developed using inspection data to meet the needs of local operators. This approach ensures the content is directly relevant and immediately applicable, enhancing the potential for compliance and improved public safety. Figure 2 illustrates a consistent trend of non-compliance, with most infractions categorized as administrative or non-critical, such as improper signage or inadequate documentation at the time of inspection. However, critical infractions have remained constant, with a reduction observed in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions which limited public access to facilities.

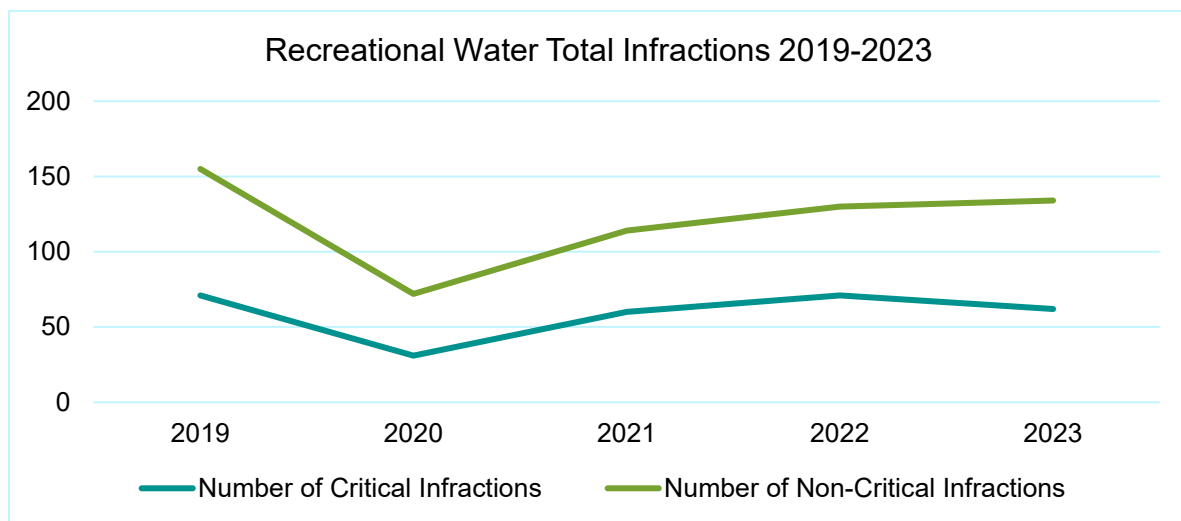


Figure 2 Total number of infractions in Recreational Water Facilities by year in WDG, data retrieved from the Environmental Health Department.

The introduction of this course aims to significantly improve the quality of public health education while ensuring compliance with provincial health and safety regulations. It is designed to reduce the risks of waterborne illnesses, injuries, and fatalities by using data to shape course structure and content. This foundation supports ongoing enhancements in health promotion and safety practices, contributing to safer public settings.

In 2018, the Ministry of Health implemented updates to the pools and spas regulations to enhance safety and compliance. The course directly addresses these regulatory updates and will collect data required to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the training. This data-driven approach keeps the course relevant and aligned with the latest public health standards.

Personal Service Settings

The PSS training course has been developed to address the unique needs of nail salons, hair salons, tattoo parlours, barbershops, electrolysis centers and other aesthetic service providers. Before the enactment of *Ontario Regulation 136/18* in 2018, PSS operated without a specific regulation and were inspected under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*. The new PSS regulation marked a significant advancement in standardizing PSS inspection to prevent the spread of infectious diseases transmitted through blood and bodily fluids. The PSS training course is a direct response to these regulatory changes, to ensure that all operators are fully informed and compliant with the new standards. This comprehensive training course offers in-depth educational content that covers everything from proper sterilization techniques to best practices for handling equipment and materials, aiming to reduce health risks and enhance safety in these settings. The online learning platform allows for PSS operators to learn at their own pace. With over 460 PSS, public health inspectors have conducted close to 2000 inspections in the last five years. Figure 3 shows the number of inspections and investigations conducted each year by public health inspectors. There is a notable decrease in the number inspections conducted in 2020-2021 due to provincial pandemic restrictions.

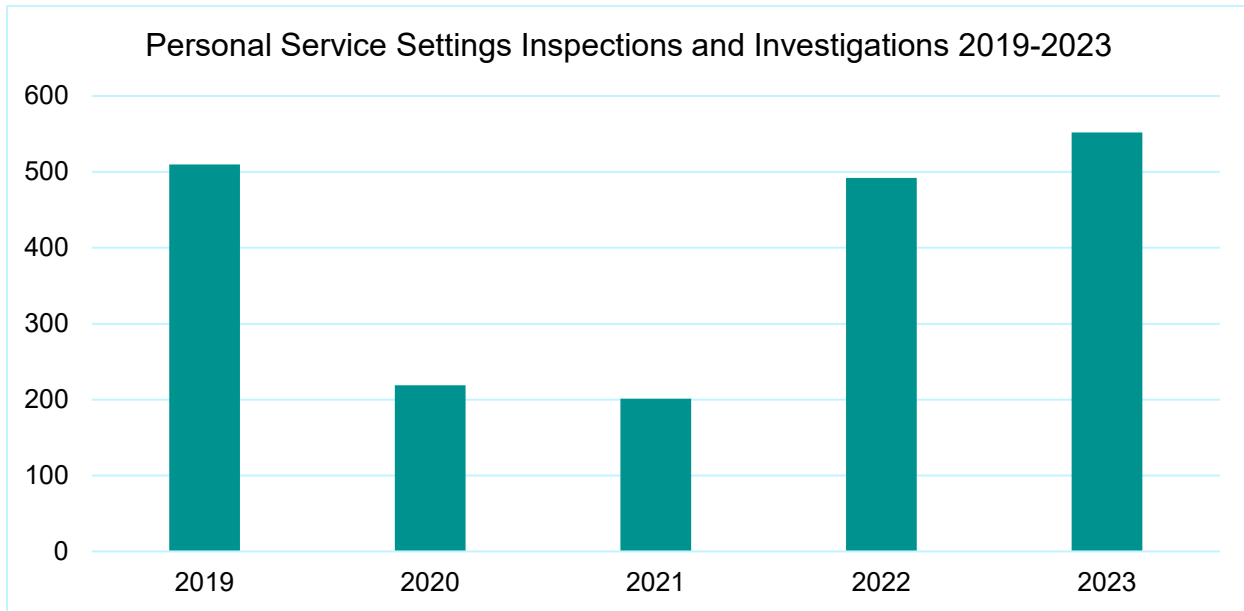


Figure 3 Total inspections and investigations by year for Personal Service Settings in WDG. Data retrieved from the Infection Control Department. Note that the reduction in inspections in 2020-2021 are directly linked to COVID19 restrictions in the province.

Analysis of infraction data spanning the past five years has highlighted the urgent need for enhanced training across a variety of facilities within the personal service sector. As illustrated in Figure 4, critical infractions represented most infractions observed by Public Health Inspectors. While instances of non-critical infractions, such as signage and record-keeping, have remained consistently low, critical infractions (e.g. reprocessing, cleaning, disinfection)

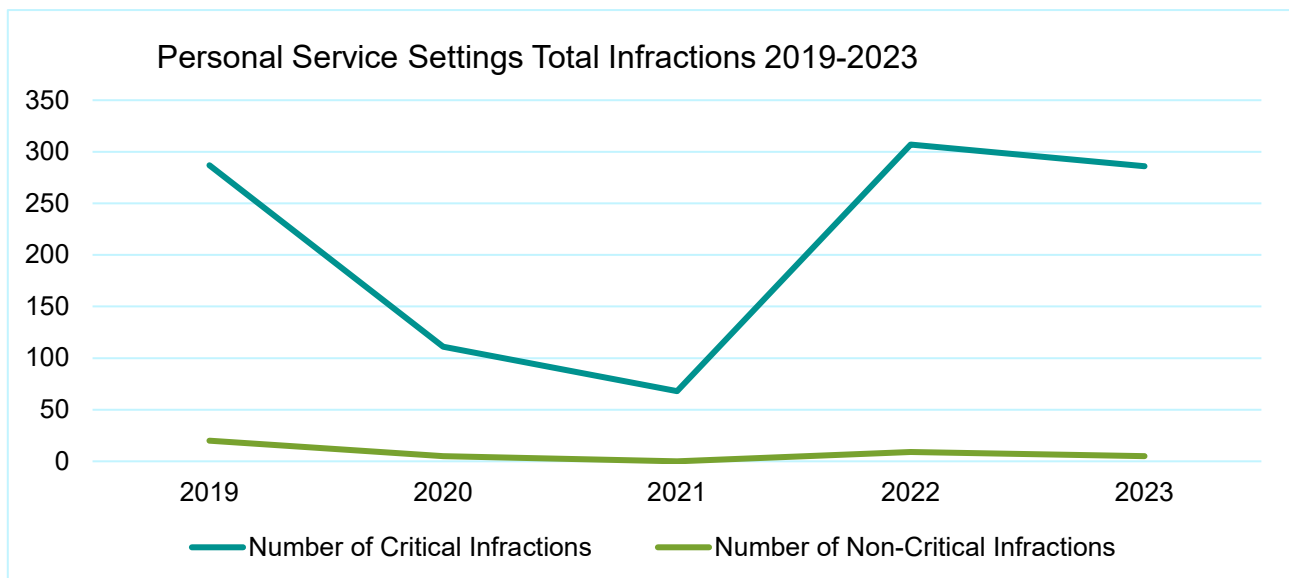


Figure 4 Number of infractions in personal service settings by year in WDG, data from Infection Control Department.

WDGPH used this data to tailor online learning programs that address the specific needs of the WDG community. This approach not only enhances the relevance of the training but also ensures it is directly aligned with observed trends and areas of concern.

Under *Ontario Regulation 136/18*, Public Health Inspectors have the authority to mandate training for PSS operators. This regulatory power is essential for improving the competence and preparedness of personnel in these environments, particularly given the historical lack of specialized health and safety training opportunities in this sector. The educational courses offered are rigorously designed to meet the stipulations of *Ontario Regulation 136/18*, promoting continuous improvement within the industry. Through comprehensive data collection and analysis, the curriculum will be regularly updated to reflect the latest health and safety research, trends in service provision and insights gathered from both inspectors and industry sources.

This proactive educational initiative is structured not only to fulfill legislative mandates but also to cultivate a culture of health and safety that extends beyond mere compliance. By improving understanding of and respect for the health implications associated with their practices, service providers are better equipped to adopt and implement best practices that safeguard both their wellbeing and that of their clients.

Next Steps

The online learning environment is scheduled for deployment in June 2024. Following its launch, the project team will actively monitor usage patterns and gather feedback from participants. This feedback is aimed at improving the user experience for future iterations of course offerings. Additionally, data will be gathered to further enhance the functionalities within this online learning platform, thereby ensuring an optimal experience for all users.

Currently, there are several external courses under development, which cover topics such as substance use diversion, infection prevention and control and zoonotic and vector-borne diseases. On an internal front, the organization plans to integrate this online environment into the onboarding and routine mandatory training processes for health unit staff.

WDGPH is committed to collaborating with business operators and engaging with local municipal authorities to promote the widespread adoption and utilization of the online learning platform. As part of the evaluation strategy, the training includes embedded surveys designed to

capture essential information about the course participants, including their industry sectors, geographic locations and more. This data will be invaluable in supporting health promotion interventions by identifying priority populations and pinpointing opportunities for additional initiatives.

The overarching goal of these efforts is to enhance accessibility to educational materials, thereby enabling business owners and other community stakeholders to improve their operational standards. It is anticipated that this increased accessibility will lead to reduced instances of non-compliance and, ultimately, foster improved health outcomes across the WDG community.

Health Equity Implications

The implementation of an online learning platform can significantly address health inequities by addressing various accessibility and educational challenges within the community. By moving courses online, the initiative eliminates barriers such as geographical limitations, travel expenses and scheduling conflicts, thereby increasing health literacy across a broader demographic, including those in remote or underserved areas. The asynchronous nature of the courses allows individuals to learn at their convenience, which is particularly beneficial for those with irregular work hours or caregiving responsibilities. However, this shift could exacerbate the digital divide, as individuals without reliable internet access or those who are not technologically savvy, might find it difficult to engage with online resources. To mitigate this, WDGPH will continue to employ traditional health promotion methods to ensure that no group is left behind.

The online platform's data collection strategies enable tailored resources to meet specific community needs and health priorities, leading to more impactful health outcomes. This targeted approach is also essential for sectors like recreational pools and personal service settings, where uniformity in training through the platform ensures up-to-date compliance with health and safety regulations that improves public health outcomes. By educating service providers and the public on health standards and preventive practices, the initiative aims to reduce disease transmission and other health-related incidents, contributing to a healthier community. The strategic use of digital tools, coupled with continued traditional methods, supports the WDGPH's goal of enhancing health equity across all community sectors.

Conclusion

The mobile friendly online learning platform embodies a strategic and adaptive approach to public health education, designed to enhance accessibility and address the diverse needs of the community. By leveraging digital technology, this platform overcomes traditional barriers to education, such as geographical constraints and scheduling conflicts and ensures learning opportunities are inclusive, regardless of socio-economic background. The platform's capability for asynchronous learning and its user-friendly design mean that even those in remote or underserved areas can benefit from high-quality, impactful learning experiences at no cost. Importantly, the initiative operates alongside traditional methods to ensure that no community member is disadvantaged by the digital divide. By continuously gathering and analyzing data on user engagement and course effectiveness, WDGPH can adapt and refine its offerings to meet emerging needs and health trends, thereby improving health outcomes and regulatory compliance across the region.

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