

## COVID-19 Response Call Centre

---

**To:** Chair and Members of the Board of Health

**Meeting Date:** November 3, 2021

**Report No.** **BH.01.NOV0321.R11** Pages: 11

**Prepared By:** Lisa Hebden, Call Centre Manager

**Approved By:** Rita Isley, Director Community Health and CNO

**Submitted By & Signature:** *Original Signed Document on file*

---

**Dr. Nicola J. Mercer, MD, MBA, MPH, FRCPC**  
**Medical Officer of Health & CEO**

---

## Recommendations

---

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

## Key Points

---

- The Call Centre responds to COVID-19 pandemic community needs, supporting families, healthcare, schools, workplaces, and other sectors.
- The Call Centre received over 46,000 calls from March 2020 to September 2021.
- The Call Centre has evolved to respond to expanding knowledge and community need, such as provincial public health measures and proof of vaccination rules.

## Background

---

Using the Incident Management System (IMS) the Call Centre was created under the Operations Section in January 2020 as a direct response to the World Health Organization (WHO) declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). A PHEIC is WHO's highest level of global warning regarding pandemic events. Knowledge of infectious disease transmission geography became extremely

important, as public health staff were quickly pulled from their regular programs to operate phone lines to answer questions from the public.

Ontario recorded its first case of COVID-19 on January 23, 2020, from a traveller from Wuhan, China. By March 2020, Ontario had reported local transmission of COVID-19, and a comprehensive Call Centre Decision Chart was developed to organize the large amount of information and guidance from the Ontario Ministry of Health. The decision chart standardized practice among the call center teams whose background was not communicable disease but quickly needed to respond with confidence to evolving situations.

In addition to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases reported in Ontario in March, an infection prevention and control lapse was identified at a local nail salon as a possible exposure site during a hepatitis C investigation. As a result, the Call Center was required to divide its resources to manage incoming calls and community concern regarding the nail salon lapse. Public calls were managed based on risk and callers were provided with community testing information. By the end of March, the Call Centre returned to focus on COVID-19, as Ontario entered the first COVID-19 wave.

## Discussion

---

The COVID-19 Call Centre can be thought of as a COVID-19 barometer for the community and the work of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) during this pandemic. Information from the Call Center is reported to Incident Command for an overall understanding of situational awareness regarding response needs and decision making. The Call Centre responds to changes within the Wellington Dufferin Guelph (WDG) community and the province. Call Centre staff must understand, synthesize, and provide messaging to the community regarding regional, provincial, and federal regulations and public health guidance in real-time.

## Call Centre Roles

Response to the public and the health sector at the beginning of the pandemic, required the COVID-19 Call Centre to manage many staff to operate 12-hour shifts, seven days a week. Many days there would be up to 34 staff answering calls from the public, health care providers, schools, businesses, and organizations from all sectors. Additional administrative support was required to listen to voicemail messages and send to the Call Center team for response.

Over the past year different existing public health information lines have been amalgamated in the background and extensive cross-training completed across the

teams. Messages are now sent out electronically to Call Centre staff based on topic and level of concern, seamless for the caller and simplified in our external communication. WDGPH has also provided a direct email address to our community health care providers to respond in the most efficient manner possible with written communication including links to the most current resources for future reference.

The Call Centre has evolved and expanded to respond to community members, healthcare providers, and sector operators regarding COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 questions and concerns to include:

- Health related COVID-19 questions
- COVID-19 risk assessments – symptoms, exposure, travel
- Self-monitoring, self-isolation, work self-isolation and guidance for close contacts
- International and Canadian travel guidelines
- COVID-19 testing – criteria and clinics
- Infection prevention and control practices and PPE
- Questions from parents with children in school, childcare, camp
- School, childcare, camp staff questions
- Questions from businesses and workplaces regarding:
  - Workplace and facility exposures and outbreaks
  - Roadmap to Reopening Ontario
  - Sector-specific questions about Provincial Regulations and Public Health Guidance
- Questions about immunizations
  - COVID-19 vaccines and proof of vaccination
  - Grade 7/8 vaccination program
  - Influenza vaccination program
- Medical Officer of Health Section 22 Orders and instructions
- General health resources (not COVID-19 related)

## Vaccine Booking

Pre-registration for the COVID-19 vaccine began February 18, 2021. Initially the link was shared with only a few hospitals and long-term care homes. On February 20<sup>th</sup>, WDGPH began sending booking codes to those registered for vaccination. The pre-registration site was announced to the public on February 23 through a media release which asked eligible groups to register.

On February 20, 2021, when the COVID-19 vaccine became available to the eligible population, the WDGPH telephony system was overloaded with calls; over 20,000

concurrent calls came into the Call Centre. A creative efficient solution was needed in order to book as many people into the COVID-19 vaccination clinics as quickly as possible, to administer the vaccine effectively and efficiently.

On March 30, 2021, to support the large number of community calls with vaccine appointment booking requests, challenges or questions, an external booking line team was activated. This team operated twelve-hour days, seven days a week and was able to manage over 2500 in-coming lines. The external booking system, known as *Answer 365* became operational on March 30 to September 17, 2021. *Answer 365* received 474,542 calls with fluctuating call volume corresponding with expanding vaccine eligibility.

<b>Timeframe 2021</b>	<b>Total Call Volume</b>
March 30 – May 24	177,015 calls
May 25 – July 19	287,935 calls
July 21 – Sept 17	9,592 calls

## Social Media Role

Call Centre staff provide community support through WDGPH social media: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Social media support assists the Communications Team to monitor and respond to health-related questions or concerns on WDGPH’s social media accounts. The Communications Team occasionally requires assistance in answering health-related COVID-19 questions. A Call Centre nurse supports Communications for rapid response to clients asking health questions. Community questions are answered directly on social media to increase public knowledge or may be sent to the Call Centre for individual follow-up when appropriate due to scenario complexity or to maintain privacy.

## How have the variety of calls been managed?

The Call Centre manager continuously monitors the rapidly shifting regulations and public health guidance to inform and prioritize our strategies and create adaptive solutions that reflect the unique needs of our community. Before the start of each working day the Call Centre Team receives a morning update by email including the daily edition of the Call Centre Resource. The morning updates include all information that has changed in the past 24-48 hours, such as regulations, public health guidance, WDGPH internal process changes and new resources and updates the 80-page resource document of credible information sources that is valuable to guide each call. The Call Centre team meets each morning to review updates, identify challenges and problem solve. The daily update is provided across the IMS teams, creating shared meaning across the organization and standardized messaging.

## Call Volume During the Pandemic

The top topics received by the Call Centre have been COVID-19 testing and test results; isolation, monitoring, distancing, gathering; and information on school, childcare, and camp attendance. Several times during pandemic the volume of calls to the Call Centre has caused a telephone system overload and collapse for the entire organizational telephony system. At the beginning of April 2020, WDGPH Information Technology implemented the Avaya soft-phone system to increase call capacity. The February 22, 2021, announcement of vaccine eligibility and preregistration of vaccine appointments overloaded the system once again. Recognizing the need for a separate system to handle vaccine appointment calls, WDGPH Information Technology implemented the Vaccine Booking Line. Appendix A illustrates the impact of selection of pandemic events on the number of calls received by the Call Centre. A comprehensive timeline of pandemic events can be seen in Appendix B.

## Conclusion

---

The Call Centre is available to all callers to support the understanding and adherence to the provincial regulations and public health guidance within businesses and workplaces, health and education sectors, food premises, sports and recreation and numerous others. The knowledge and expertise of the team is utilized on the Call Centre telephone line, health care provider email portal, booking line team, third dose referrals, and social media. The role of Call Centre now includes the school vaccination program, vaccine preventable diseases, and is the contact point for childcare operators and school administrators.

The COVID-19 Call Centre has been responsive and adaptive throughout the pandemic by adjusting to changing direction and guidelines, knowledge expansion and community impact. The impact of the events of the pandemic to the community and businesses of WDG are responded to by an experienced team of dynamic public health professionals.

## Ontario Public Health Standard

---

Foundational Standard - Emergency Management

Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control

## 2020 WDGPH Strategic Direction(s)

---

**Service Delivery:** We will provide our programs and services in a flexible, modern and accessible manner, and will ensure they reflect the immediate needs of our Clients and our role in the broader sector.

**System Transformation:** We will equip the Agency for change in all aspects of our work so that we are ready for transformational system change when the time comes.

**Knowledge Transfer:** We will ensure that our decision-making and policy development efforts are informed by meaningful health data at all times.

## Health Equity

---

Health equity is the condition where everyone can attain their full health potential and are not disadvantaged due to their social position or other socially determined circumstances. Public health advice and guidance is available to all populations through a variety of means to support accessibility. Strategies were implemented to increase accessibility of public health information and limit possible barriers.

- Call Centre telephone lines with language interpretation services available
- Phone lines with expanded hours to support peak times
- Transportation supports organized for clients to access COVID-19 testing
- Organization of COVID-19 testing for homebound community members
- Transportation services with community partners for COVID-19 vaccinations
- Testing locations and vaccine clinic information supported by community partners

## References

---

None

## Appendices

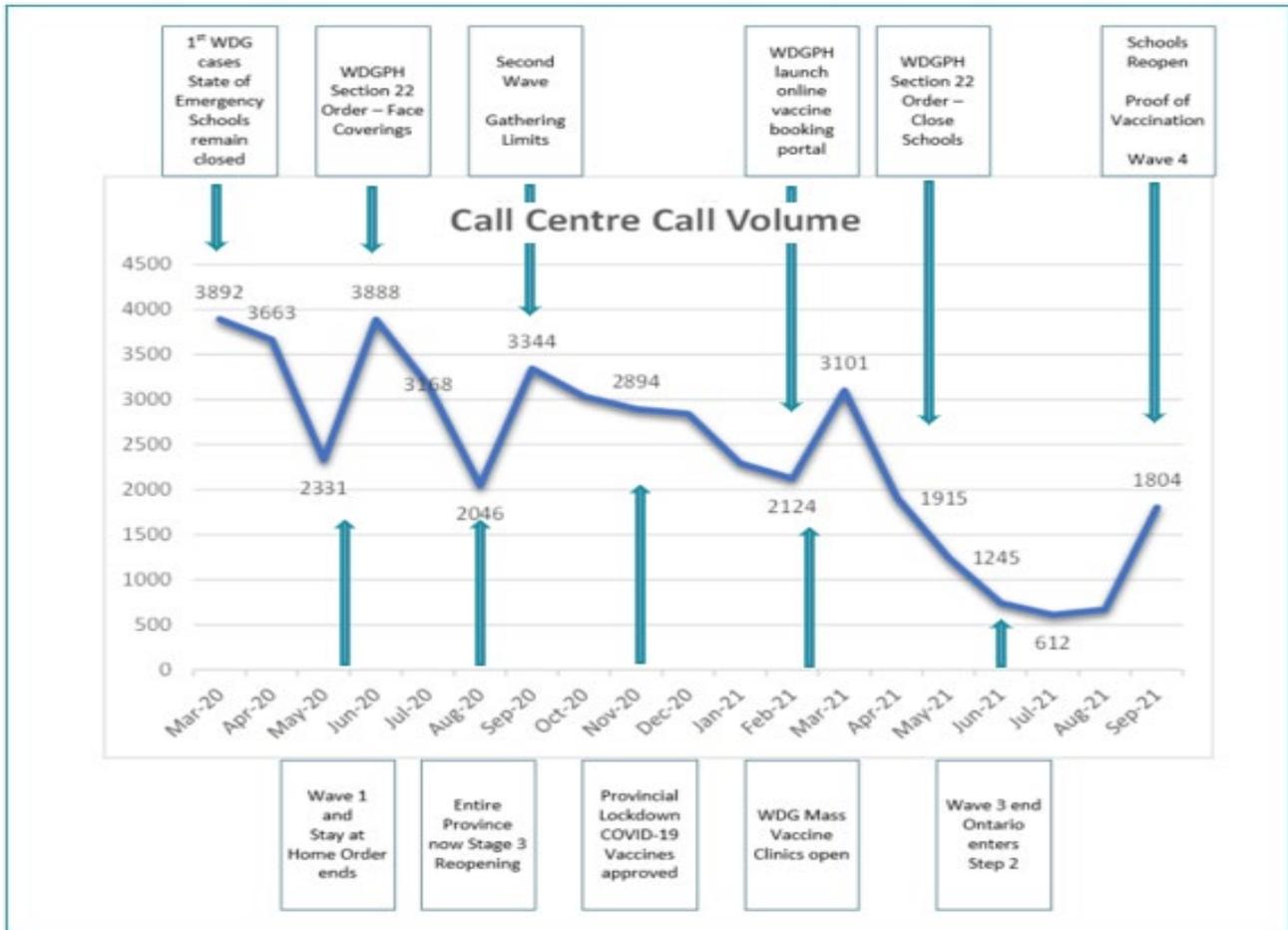
---

Appendix A – Impact Call Center Volume based on Pandemic Event

Appendix B – Timeline of the COVID-19 Pandemic Events

# Appendix A

## Impact Call Center Volume based on Pandemic Event



## Appendix B

### Timeline of COVID-19 Pandemic Events

Month	Date	Event
Dec 2019	31	WHO informed of pneumonia of unknown origin in Wuhan, China
Jan 2020	7	Novel coronavirus identified as cause "2019-nCoV"
	23	First case in Canada
	25	First case in Ontario, traveller from Wuhan
Feb 2020	3	WDGPH COVID-19 Response Call Centre set up
	26	5 <sup>th</sup> Ontario case, traveller from Iran, transmits virus to her husband
Mar 2020	1	First comprehensive Call Centre Decision Chart
	10	Call Centre operating 12hr/day, 7 days/week (34 PHNs)
	12	Schools remain closed after March Break
	16	New efficient documentation system for Call Centre
	17	Ontario State of Emergency
	21	Provincial closure of non-essential businesses x14 days
		Wellington County → State of Emergency
	26	Guelph → State of Emergency (Outbreak at Guelph General Hospital)
		County of Dufferin → State of Emergency
	30	Provincial closure of all outdoor amenities
31	Ontario announces schools closed until at least May	
	WDGPH phone system overload and collapse	
Apr 2020	3	Stay at Home Order issued
	6	Call Centre staff move to remote work (TEAMS, soft phones)
	8	Creation of 4 Call Centre Decision Charts to support practice
	11	Call Centre begins calling all clients with COVID-19 results
	27	Ontario launches – Framework for Reopening Ontario
May 2020	4	WDGPH self-monitoring tool before entering office sites
	6	Certain businesses can open with strict guidelines
	14	WDG community COVID-19 testing by EMS for homebound clients
		Minister Elliott confirms mask recommendations
	19	Ontario enters Stage 1 of Framework, but schools remain closed
	26	WDGPH all staff Public Health Ontario IPAC Training
	27	MOH – Operational Requirements for Health Sector Restart
		CMOH – Directive #2 HCPs Operating a Group Practice
31	Long-Term Care Home staff surveillance testing	

Jun 2020	1	Call Centre operates 12hr/day, 7day/week; 15 PHNs and 5-8 other staff
	2	Stay-at-Home Order ends
	10	WDGPH Section 22 Order – Face Coverings
	12	<b>WDG enters Stage 2 of Framework for Reopening</b> Gathering limit = 10 and “Social Circle Bubble”
	24	Ontario extends State of Emergency until July 15
Jul 2020	16	Ontario Emergency Orders extended until July 29
	17	<b>WDG enters Stage 3 of the Framework for Reopening</b>
	21	Ontario government passes Bill 195 – Reopening Ontario (A Flexible Response to COVID-19) Act
	31	Provincial Case & Contact Management database launched
Aug 2020	12	<b>Entire province now in Stage 3</b>
	14	Capacity limits increased for indoor sports, fitness
	26	Ontario releases – COVID-19 Management Plans for Schools
Sept 2020	7	WDGPH PHNs and PHIs to complete IPAC Training Level 2
	18	Cases surge – Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) “we are losing ground”
		WDGPH Section 22 Mask Order revised – event spaces, private transportation, faith settings
	23	COVID-19 Asymptomatic testing moved from ACs to pharmacies
	25	New PH Asymptomatic testing moved from to pharmacies
	28	<b>SECOND WAVE</b> (700/day) OHA urges return of province to Stage 2
Oct 2020	2	Province-wide Mask Policy & capacity restrictions for gyms, restaurants, event spaces
	3	COVID-19 Testing backlog (over 90,000 tests) testing now by appt. only
	7	Ford urges celebrate Thanksgiving with only your household
	9	Stay-at-Home Order and avoid non-essential travel
	25	Ontario reports 1000 new cases for the 1 <sup>st</sup> time
Nov 2020	3	PHAC New mandatory requirements for travellers to Canada
		Response Framework Keeping Ontario Safe and Open
	7	<b>WDG moved to YELLOW – Protect</b>
	13	Section 22 Class Order Old Order Mennonite Churches & Schools to close
	14	<b>WDG moved to ORANGE – Restrict</b>
	20	Ontario reports 1418 new cases
25	Call Centre creates Integrated Documentation (health and non-health)	
Dec 2020	6	Ontario reports 1924 new cases
	7	Ontario’s 3-part Vaccination Plan roll out
	9	Health Canada approves Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine

	11	<b>WDG moved to RED – Control</b>
	17	OHA urges government to for 4-week lockdown
	23	Health Canada approves Moderna COVID-19 vaccine
	26	<b>Provincial Lockdown and Stay-at-Home Order</b>
		Ontario confirms 1 <sup>st</sup> cases of <b>ALPHA VARIANT</b>
	29	Ontario confirms 2553 new cases
	30	Ontario confirms 2923 new cases
	31	Ontario confirms 4249 new cases
Jan 2021	4	One third of Ontario long-term care homes (LTCH) in outbreak
	5	Ontario plan to vaccinate LTCH residents, staff, essential visitors
	6	Ontario pilot program to test international travellers
	7	Ontario confirms 3519 new cases; Online learning extends to January 25
	8	Ontario confirms 4299 new cases
	14	<b>Stay-at-Home Order – GREY Stage 1</b> Outdoor gatherings = 5 people, reduced hours non-essential businesses
	15	Pfizer shipment cut in half and no shipment the following week
	25	Ontario extends 2 <sup>nd</sup> dose interval for COVID-19 Vaccine International travellers PCR test, quarantine hotel
Feb 2021	1	Ontario confirms 1 <sup>st</sup> <b>BETA VARIANT</b>
	7	Ontario confirms 1 <sup>st</sup> <b>GAMMA VARIANT</b>
	11	Ontario school March Break postponed to April 12
	14	COVID-19 Vaccine priority age 79+, indigenous, chronic disease homecare
	16	<b>WDG moved to RED – Control</b>
	18	WDGPH COVID-19 Vaccine pre-registration soft launch (LTCH/hospitals)
	20	WDGPH sends booking codes to those eligible
	23	WDGPH COVID-19 Vaccine Pre-registration site now public
26	Health Canada approves AstraZeneca (AZ) COVID-19 Vaccine	
Mar 2021	2	Ontario recommendation – AZ for use for ages 65+ years
	3	AZ arrives, distributed to pharmacies
	5	Health Canada approves Janssen, although never received
	12	WDGPH Section 22 Mask Order #3 – workplaces, etc.
	15	Ontario launch Online Vaccine Booking Portal <b>THIRD WAVE declared</b>
	29	Ontario suspends AZ under age 55 years
	30	WDGPH Vaccine Booking Line Live (Answer 365)
Apr 2021	3	<b>Provincial Shutdown – All regions WHITE</b>
	6	WDGPH Section 22 Order – Schools close, move to online learning
	8	Ontario 3 <sup>rd</sup> State of Emergency, Stay-at-Home Order, and 3 <sup>rd</sup> Lockdown

	11	Ontario reports 4456 new cases
	12	Ontario schools stay remote learning following spring break
	18	Ontario announces AZ for use 40+ years
	23	Ontario confirms 36 cases of <b>DELTA VARIANT</b>
	30	Mandatory quarantine for US border travellers
May 2021	3	Vaccine eligibility for 18+ years living in hotspot (N1L)
	5	Vaccine eligibility for education workers Pfizer approved for age 12- to 17-year-olds
	8	Ontario expands Pfizer and Moderna to pharmacy hotspots
	26	Ontario pauses AstraZeneca 1 <sup>st</sup> doses
Jun 2021	2	Ontario announces school remain remote learning for rest of school year
	11	<b>Ontario enters STEP 1 of Roadmap to Reopen</b>
	14	2 <sup>nd</sup> dose eligibility for those in hotspots (N1H)
	21	2 <sup>nd</sup> dose eligibility for age 70+ and immunocompromised
	23	2 <sup>nd</sup> dose eligibility if 1 <sup>st</sup> dose on/before May 30
	28	2 <sup>nd</sup> dose eligibility for all Ontarians age 18+
	30	<b>Ontario enters STEP 2 of the Roadmap to Reopen</b>
Jul 2021	5	Ontario announces all youth 12-17 eligible for COVID-19 vaccine
	8	WDGPH vaccine clinics open for self-booking appointments
	16	<b>Ontario enters STEP 3 of the Roadmap to Reopen</b> Congregate settings ease visitor restrictions
Aug 2021	16	Fully vaccinated travellers arriving to Canada exempt from quarantine
	17	<b>EXIT STEP paused indefinitely; Ontario enters FORTH WAVE</b> Ontario announces – Vaccination Policy in Health Settings
	18	Ontario releases 3 <sup>rd</sup> dose recommendations for vulnerable populations Pfizer approved for birth year 2009
Sept 2021	1	Ontario announces Vaccine Certificate Program WDGPH Open Letter to Workplaces re: developing vaccination policy
	7	Directive #6 – Vaccination policy in Health Settings in effect
	16	Pfizer (Comirnaty); Moderna (SpikeVax); AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) clarification
	22	Vaccination Proof Required – indoor non-essential businesses
	23	WDGPH Letter of Instruction – Proof of vaccination for organized sports
	29	3 <sup>rd</sup> dose eligibility for immunocompromised and seniors in congregated settings
Oct 2021	1	Call Centre operating 9-4, Mon-Fri; 8-12 staff