

## Strengthening Support for Local Operators: Findings from the 2024-2025 Needs Assessment

---

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

**Meeting Date:** September 3, 2025

**Report No.** **BH.01.SEP0325.R23**, Pages: 8

**Prepared By:** Phil Wong, Operations Director, Health Protection

**Approved By:** Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum, Acting Vice President, Health Protection and Emergency Preparedness

**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

---

- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health launched its first Operator Needs Assessment in November 2024. Over 300 operators participated in the assessment across food, recreational water, and personal service sectors.
- Operators reported that Public Health Inspectors were their most trusted source of public health information (52.5%) followed by the WDG Public Health website (44.1%). Together, these findings make Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health the primary source of public health information for operators.
- Of the operators surveyed, about two-thirds preferred to receive public health information digitally through email updates. Over half of operators preferred to use online resources, highlighting the need for accessible, user-friendly digital tools.
- Assessment insights will guide WDG Public Health service modernization to improve accessibility and responsiveness, supporting key priorities of the 2024–2028 Strategic Plan: modernization, partnerships, and health equity.

## Background

---

WDG Public Health plays a critical role in protecting community health through the inspection and support of over 3,000 regulated businesses, including food premises (e.g., restaurants, grocery stores), recreational water facilities (e.g., pools, splash pads), and personal service settings (e.g., salons, tattoo parlours). Each year, Public Health Inspectors (PHIs) conduct more than 5,200 inspections to ensure these businesses comply with public health legislation under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act* (HPPA).

PHIs are central to ensuring public safety and compliance. They enforce key provincial regulations such as the *Ontario Food Premises Regulation*, *Public Pools Regulation*, and *Personal Services Settings Regulation*. Beyond enforcement, PHIs provide ongoing education, clarification, and technical guidance to operators, who often rely heavily on inspectors for updates, interpretation of legislation, and advice on best practices.

Despite strong relationships between PHIs and local operators, there was previously no formal data on how businesses prefer to receive public health guidance, what tools are most helpful, or what barriers they encounter in accessing services and achieving compliance. This gap made it difficult to assess whether current approaches were effectively meeting operator needs, particularly across the diverse and varied communities within WDG.

To address this, the Operator Needs Assessment was launched in November 2024 by the Health Protection and Emergency Preparedness (HPEP) Division. The assessment aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how operators access and use public health information, their preferred communication channels and formats, the challenges they face in complying with regulations, and the kinds of support they need to succeed. The Data & Analytics team supported the analysis of results.

Findings from the assessment will guide WDG Public Health in enhancing its client-centered and equitable service delivery. Specifically, the insights will support efforts to:

- Improve communication with inspected businesses, ensuring messaging is timely, accessible, and aligned with operator needs.
- Identify and reduce systemic and practical barriers to compliance through proactive, upstream interventions.
- Strengthen trust and collaboration with local operators, especially small businesses that may face unique challenges navigating regulatory requirements.
- Ensure services are culturally appropriate and responsive to the diversity of business types and populations across the region.

This work reflects WDG Public Health’s ongoing commitment to evidence-informed practice that not only protects public health but also supports economic sustainability. By better understanding the realities faced by business operators—especially those in smaller or resource-constrained settings—WDG Public Health can tailor inspection strategies and programming to support long-term compliance and improved public health outcomes.

## Discussion

To better support operators and protect public health, the HPEP Division launched the Operator Needs Assessment. The goal was to better understand operators’ needs and challenges, improve support strategies and ultimately strengthen health protection programs.

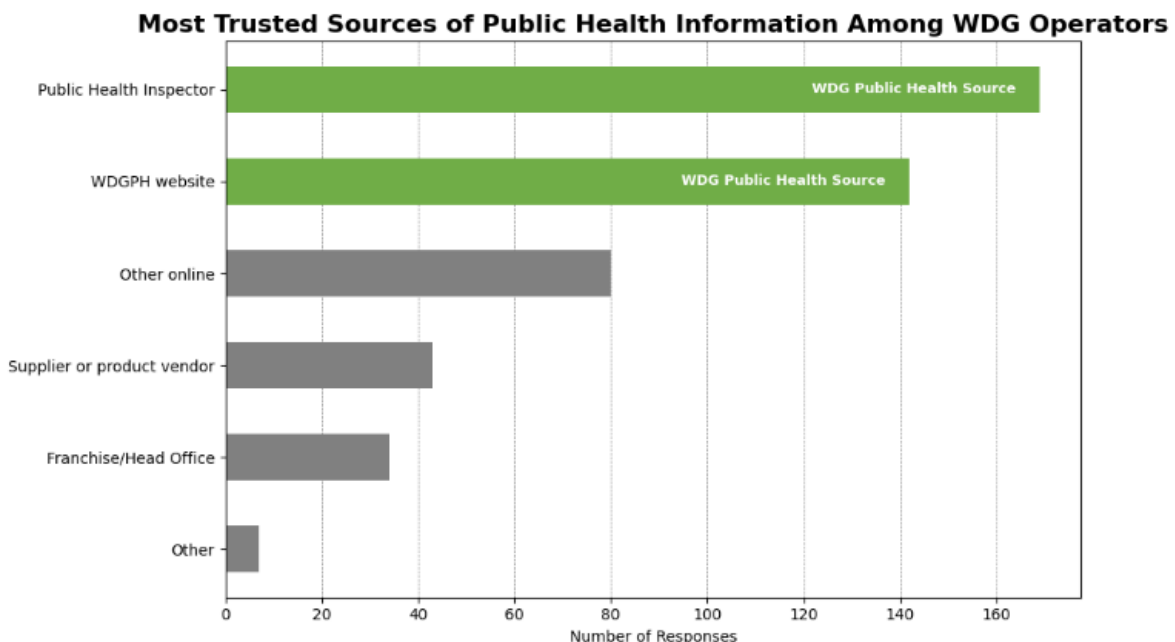
Over 300 operators from food premises, personal service settings, and recreational water facilities participated. Their feedback gives clear direction on what is working well and where improvements are needed.

## Key Findings

### Public Health Inspectors are Highly Trusted

When asked to select all sources they most trusted for public health information, more than half of operators (52%) chose PHIs and just under half (44%) selected the WDG Public Health website. This highlights that WDG Public Health is the most trusted provider of public health information among operators.

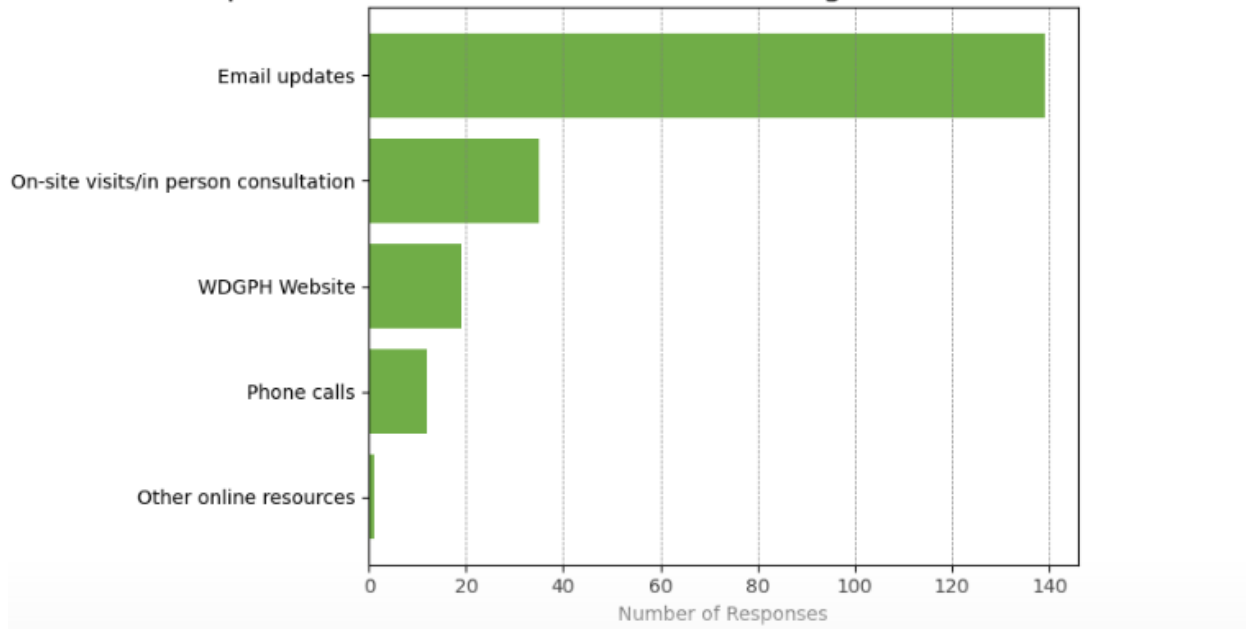
Operators make much less use of sources outside WDG Public Health, such as vendors, franchise offices, and other online platforms.



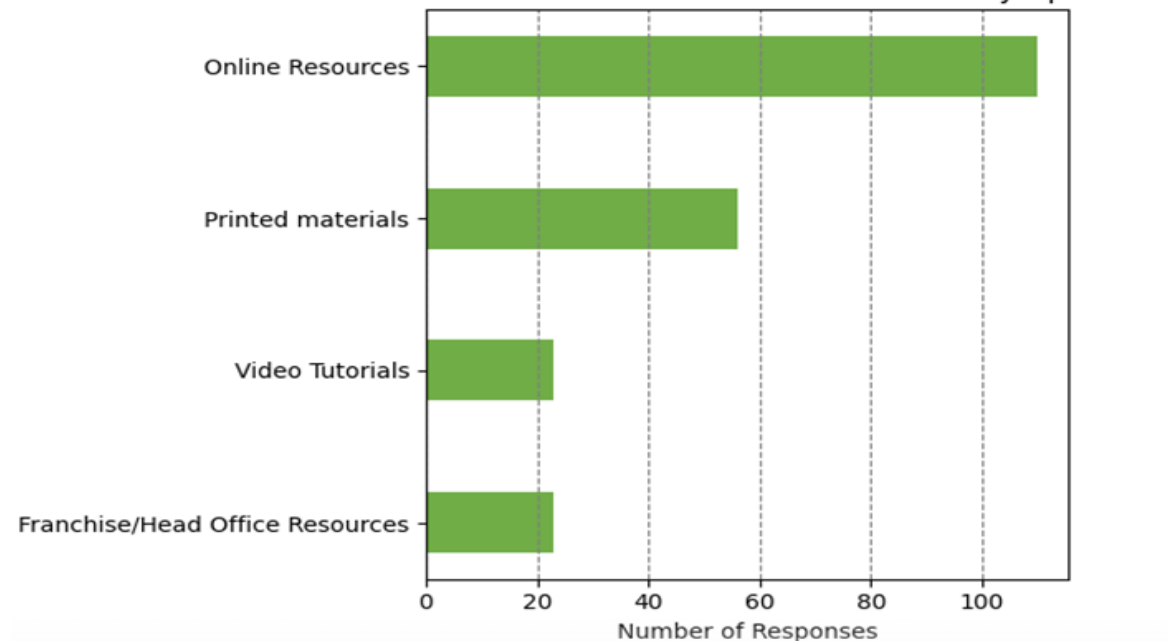
## Operators Strongly Prefer Digital Communication and Resources

Many operators expressed a desire for timely, digital communication and online self-serve tools. Email is the preferred method for receiving updates with over 60%, underscoring the demand for proactive digital communication. Respondents' strong preference for online resources emphasizes the importance of providing accessible, mobile-friendly support that can be accessed on demand.

Operators' Preferred Method of Receiving Public Health Information



Formats of Public Health Resources Preferred by Operators



## Assessment Limitations

While the Operator Needs Assessment offers valuable insights into how local operators engage with public health information, several limitations may affect the representativeness and comprehensiveness of the findings.

- **Sector Representation Gaps:** The vast majority (73%) of responses came from food premises, with substantially fewer from personal service settings (20%) or recreational water facilities (7%). This uneven distribution suggests that the assessment may not fully reflect the needs and experiences of operators in underrepresented sectors.
- **Barriers to Participation:** Language, literacy, and digital access barriers may have prevented some operators from completing the assessment. Although in-person support and paper versions were made available, uptake of these supports was low. Consequently, operators facing accessibility challenges may not have been adequately represented.

These limitations highlight the need for more targeted outreach to underrepresented sectors and regions, as well as enhanced support for participants with accessibility needs. Future assessments should aim to refine question design, diversify distribution methods, and strengthen engagement strategies to ensure broader, more equitable participation across the WDG operator community.

## Health Equity Implications

The Operator Needs Assessment was designed to identify how operators of inspected businesses in WDG access public health resources, and whether they face barriers that limit their ability to access information. While most operators reported being able to access and use the resources provided, the responses pointed to several equity-related considerations.

Operators working in smaller, non-traditional settings, such as home-based kitchens, community facilities, or personal service settings, may have more limited capacity to seek or apply public health guidance. Similarly, operators in rural or remote areas may struggle with unreliable internet access, reducing their ability to use digital tools or receive timely updates.

While this assessment did not survey all potential equity-deserving groups, the data highlights the importance of accessible and flexible resource delivery. Supporting diverse operators, regardless of their facility type, location, or resource level, strengthens public health outcomes across the community.

## Community Impact

When operators follow public health rules, it helps keep the entire community safe. This includes preventing things like foodborne illness, water contamination, and the spread of infections in personal service settings.

The Operator Needs Assessment also supports WDG Public Health's Strategic Plan by:

- Strengthening relationships with local businesses.
- Enhancing communication tools and channels.
- Reducing barriers to compliance, particularly for equity-seeking groups.
- Improving population health outcomes through better-informed operators.

Ultimately, a better-informed and better-supported operator means a safer and healthier community for everyone.

## Conclusion

---

The Operator Needs Assessment has provided valuable insights into how local operators of inspected businesses access public health information, what supports they find most useful, and where improvements are needed. Operators trust PHIs and value timely, accessible guidance. By investing in mobile-friendly, online resources, the HPEP Division can improve compliance and protect community health.

Next steps include:

- Reviewing and simplifying the existing web pages most used by operators to ensure they are easy to navigate and mobile-friendly, working closely with the Communications team to improve layout, clarity, and accessibility.
- Collaborating with the Communications team to create more visual and easy-to-use resources, such as checklists and short instructional videos, to help operators better understand and follow public health guidance.
- Using the assessment feedback to help PHIs tailor their support during visits, focusing on what operators find most useful.
- Continuing to gather feedback to monitor progress, identify new needs, and improve support over time.
- Exploring future opportunities to gather feedback from operators in underrepresented settings or sectors to better understand their needs.

Strong partnerships between operators and PHIs are essential. By listening to operator feedback, WDG Public Health can continue to provide effective, equitable, and responsive public health support 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

## References

---

1. Health Protection and Promotion Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. H.7 [Internet]. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2023 [cited 2025 May 13]. Available from: <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90h07>
2. Ontario Regulation 493/17: Food Premises [Internet]. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2023 [cited 2025 Jun 4]. Available from: <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/170493>
3. Ontario Regulation 565: Public Pools [Internet]. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2023 [cited 2025 Jun 4]. Available from: <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/900565>
4. Ontario Regulation 136/18: Personal Service Settings [Internet]. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2023 [cited 2025 Jun 4]. Available from: <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/180136>
5. Ontario Ministry of Health. Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services, and Accountability [Internet]. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2018 [cited 2025 Jun 4]. Available from: [https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph\\_standards/](https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph_standards/)