

Mitigating Household Health Hazards

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

- That the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- There has been an increase in health hazard-related calls post-pandemic, highlighting the need for enhanced public health interventions.
- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) has received 214 complaints and service requests in 2023-2024, with a majority related to housing issues that require field deployment of staff or referrals to municipal partners.
- Key initiatives include the City of Guelph Enforcement Managers Working Group and the development of a Household Hazards page on the WDGPH website to support with social service and enforcement navigation.
- The "No Wrong Door" approach ensures community members receive the appropriate assistance and resources regardless of the nature of their complaint.

Background

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) health hazard calls have increased. During 2023-2024, the Environmental Health team responded to 214 complaints and service requests, primarily concerning housing issues. The main concerns reported by tenants included mould, air quality, and bed bugs. These issues require onsite visits from Public Health Inspectors or referrals to municipal property standards and bylaws to investigate.

The Health Protection and Promotion Act (HPPA) mandates public health units to address health hazards, including those found in households. The Act defines a health hazard as, "a condition of a premises, substance, thing, plant or animal other than man, or a solid, liquid, gas or combination of any of them, that has or is likely to have an adverse effect on the health of any person."¹

This broad definition encompasses various household health hazards that can significantly impact community well-being. The Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS) provide direction on addressing household health hazards through the following documents:

- The Healthy Environments Standard, 2021 requires boards of health to assess, inspect, and respond to environmental health issues related to health hazards in various settings, including residential properties.²
- The Health Hazard Response Protocol, 2019 outlines specific requirements for public health units to prevent or reduce exposure to health hazards and promote healthy environments. This protocol directly applies to household health hazards by mandating the assessment, investigation, and response to potential health hazards in residential settings.³
- The Healthy Environments and Climate Change Guideline, 2018 emphasizes addressing environmental health issues, including those found in households. It requires public health units to consider various factors that can impact indoor air quality, water quality, and other aspects of household environments that may pose health risks.⁴

The initiatives of the Health Hazard program align with the 2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Plan and are designed to serve the community. Several initiatives emphasize improving health outcomes, focusing on children's health, building strong partnerships, innovating programs and services, and leading the way toward a sustainable public health system.

Discussion

Current Situation and Challenges

The increase in health hazard-related calls signifies the need for effective public health interventions to address household health hazards. The 214 complaints received in the 2023-2024 period included issues such as mould, poor air quality, and bed bugs, with a significant proportion of these complaints coming from tenants. Figure 1 outlines the type of health hazard-related complaints within the WDG area. The rise in these calls highlights the vulnerabilities faced by community members, particularly those in rented housing, and underscores the importance of addressing these issues to improve overall public health.

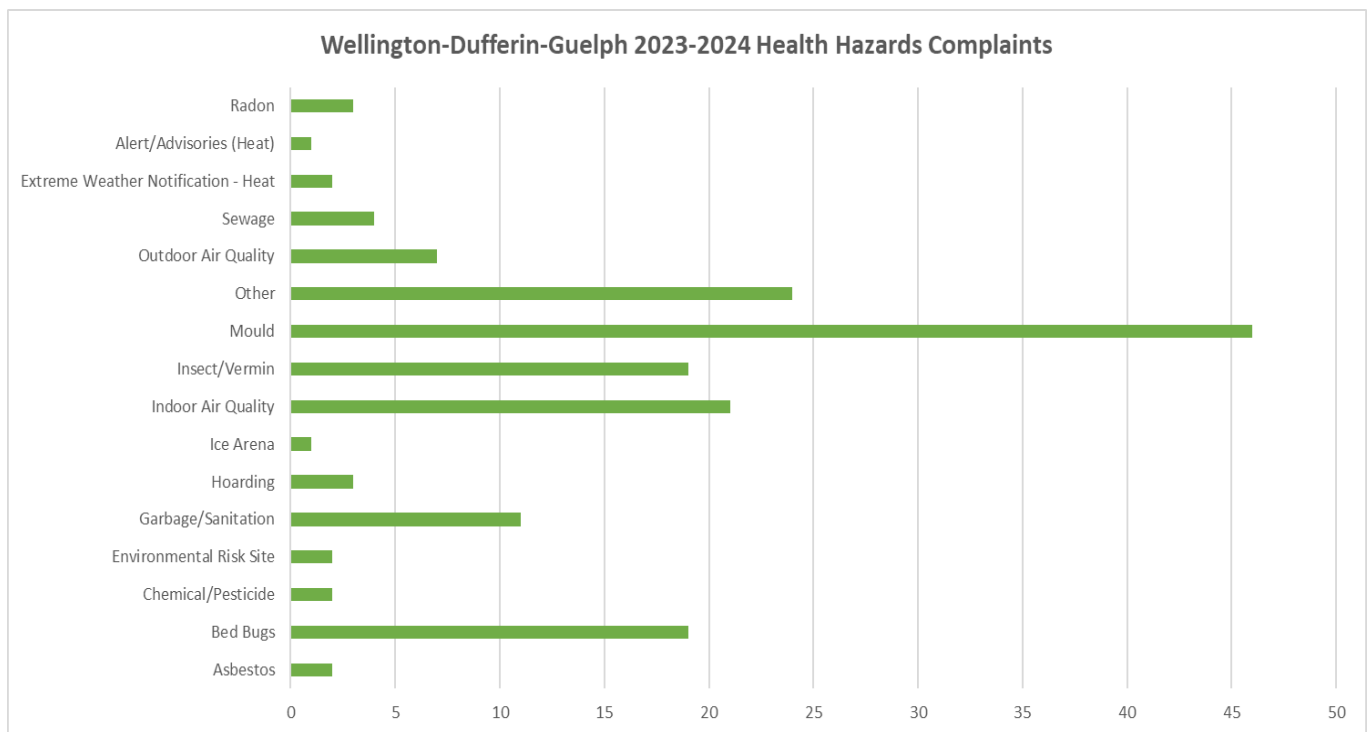


Figure 1: 2023-2024 Health Hazard Complaint Type

Challenges Include:

- Growing demand for public health interventions in household environments
- Complexity of issues necessitating coordination among multiple agencies
- Need for enhanced public awareness and education on household health hazards
- Limited resources to manage the increasing volume of complaints
- Rising concerns regarding children's health in household settings

Strategic Initiatives

1. **City of Guelph Enforcement Managers Working Group:** This collaboration involves strengthening the relationship and channels of communication between the City of Guelph's bylaw, fire, and police services, and WDGPB to address and mitigate household health hazards. The collaboration ensures that referrals are provided, and lines of communication open for situational awareness. This group aims to provide a coordinated response to community health hazards, ensuring all relevant agencies are involved or notified in addressing the issues reported by community members.
2. **Household Hazards Landing Page:** The WDGPB Communications and Environmental Health teams are building a comprehensive WDGPB website page dedicated to household hazards that goes live in the Fall of 2024. This page focuses on indoor air quality, lead exposure, water quality, mould, hoarding, bed bugs, and sewage. The landing page also serves as a resource to help community members navigate local social services and supports, such as legal clinics and landlord-tenant boards. Local contacts for bylaw enforcement, property standards, and other enforcement agencies will all be available on the landing page, serving as a centralized location for all WDG residents to access available services and resources.
3. **No Wrong Door Approach:** The Environmental Health team has adopted a "No Wrong Door" approach for handling complaints and service requests. This approach ensures that community members are directed to the appropriate services and support, even if their concerns do not fall primarily within public health jurisdiction. This approach aims to assist community members in reducing potential health hazard exposures in their homes and mitigating risks that may arise.

Health Equity Implications

The "No Wrong Door" approach helps to ensure that individuals who may not know where to seek help are provided with the guidance and resources they need. This approach helps reduce barriers to help all community members live in safe and healthy environments.

- Specific health equity implications include:
- Improve access to information and resources for marginalized communities
- Reduce barriers to seeking help for household health hazards
- Enhance support for tenants facing health hazards in rental properties
- Increase awareness of health hazards among diverse community groups

Community Impact

The increase in health hazard-related calls and the subsequent implementation of these initiatives have significant implications for the community. WDGPB is working to improve overall health outcomes, particularly for vulnerable populations such as tenants and low-income families by addressing health hazard concerns.

Key Community Impacts Include:

- Improve living conditions for residents affected by household health hazards
- Enhance community awareness of health hazards and available resources
- Strengthen partnerships between public health and other community agencies
- Potential reduction in health care costs associated with hazard-related illnesses

The collaborative efforts with local enforcement agencies and the provision of comprehensive online resources on the Household Hazards webpage help community members have the support they need to address health hazards in their homes. In addition, Public Health Inspectors are always available to answer inquiries during regular business hours.

Future Directions

Moving forward, WDGPB will:

- Continue to monitor the effectiveness of these initiatives and make necessary adjustments to improve their impact through internal evaluation
- Explore opportunities for expanding partnerships with additional community organizations
- Support the development of targeted outreach programs for high-risk populations
- Investigate the use of data analytics to identify trends and predict potential higher health hazard-related areas

Success Will be Measured Through:

- Reduction in health hazard-related calls
- Improvements in the overall health and well-being of community members
- Increased community engagement with the online Household Hazards page
- Positive feedback from community partners and stakeholders

WDGPB will continue to engage with community partners to ensure that public health interventions are responsive to community needs.

Conclusion

The increase in health hazard-related calls post-pandemic has highlighted the need for enhanced public health interventions in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph. The health hazard strategic approach includes the City of Guelph Enforcement Managers Working Group, the online Household Hazards page, and embracing the "No Wrong Door" approach, to address these issues and improve overall health outcomes.

By fostering strong partnerships and providing comprehensive resources, WDGPB is working to ensure all community members have access to safe and healthy living environments. These efforts align with the organization's strategic goals and demonstrate a commitment to addressing health inequities and improving community well-being.

The success of these initiatives will depend on continued collaboration with community partners, ongoing evaluation and adaptation of strategies, and sustained engagement with the public. As WDGPB moves forward, it will remain committed to innovating its approach to household health hazards, ensuring the community is well-equipped to address these challenges and maintain optimal health.

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. [Internet]. 1990, S.C. [cited 2024 July 4]. Available from: Health Protection and Promotion Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. H.7 (ontario.ca)
2. Ontario. Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Healthy Environments Standard, 2021. [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2024 July 4]. Available from: <https://files.ontario.ca/moh-ontario-public-health-standards-en-2021.pdf>
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4. Ontario. Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Healthy Environments and Climate Change Guideline, 2018. [Internet]. 2018 [cited 2024 July 4]. Available from: <https://files.ontario.ca/moh-guidelines-healthy-environments-climate-change-en-2018.pdf>