

City of Saskatoon COVID-19 Response – Comprehensive Update

ISSUE

The emergence of the SARS CoV-2 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) resulted in several adjustments in the City of Saskatoon (City) Occupational Health and Safety and Business Continuity Plans. Prior to July 11, 2021 the Government of Saskatchewan's Public Health Order provided direction for some aspects of staff safety. With the lifting of this Order and its restrictions, the City has continued to review its Occupational Health Plans.

The local COVID-19 situation has changed significantly from July 11, 2021 and, as a result, the Administration has updated its Occupational Health and Safety Plans and particularly the COVID-19 Exposure Control Plans for staff. This report provides a comprehensive overview of the City's current work in responding to COVID-19.

BACKGROUND

On March 18, 2020, the Government of Saskatchewan officially declared a provincial State of Emergency as a response to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Since this declaration the City of Saskatoon has been following the Province's direction related to staff safety.

On July 11, 2021, the Government of Saskatchewan entered Step Three of the Re-Opening Roadmap and all public health orders related to COVID-19 were lifted. As of July 11, 2021, requirements under the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations changed from a very prescriptive approach to controlling the spread and transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace to an employer-determined approach.

CURRENT STATUS

COVID-19 Situation

The City followed the Government of Saskatchewan lifting of the Public Health Orders by removing the requirement for City departments to retain the Health and Safety Exposure Control Plans previously in place prior to July 11, 2021.

The City of Saskatoon's response to COVID-19 has been aligned with the direction coming from the Government of Canada and the Government of Saskatchewan. The City has also relied on the expertise of its local Saskatchewan Health Authority Saskatoon Medical Health Officers.

Since July 11, 2021, when the Government of Saskatchewan Public Health Orders were lifted, the following changes have occurred:

- The Assessed Risk of Community Transmission in Saskatoon changed from “COVID transmission is controlled, but there is a risk of community transmission” (July) to “High likelihood that COVID transmission is not controlled.” This is the highest threshold level for epidemic spread. See Appendix 1 “Assessed Risk of Epidemic Transmission.”
- On July 11, 2021 there were 59 active cases in Saskatoon. On August 28, 2021 there were 463 cases. This is an increase of 785% or 404 cases in 46 days.
- Dr. Jasmine Hasselback, Saskatoon Medical Health Officer, Area Department Lead, Public Health and Preventative Medicine (Health Protection, Health Surveillance, Disease and Injury Prevention, Population Health Assessment, Health Promotion, Emergency Preparedness and Response), Saskatchewan Health Authority has recommended: “Masking indoors in public places.” In addition, Dr. Hasselback shared this message on August 27th from the local Medical Health Officers:
 - “The COVID-19 situation in Saskatoon has escalated to an unprecedented rate from last week to this week. We are seeing pressures on our health system that are unsustainable. It is imperative that the entire community action all non-pharmaceutical public health measures that they can immediately.”
- The [Saskatoon Wastewater Data](#) has indicated increasing rates of COVID RNA in the Saskatoon wastewater. The last data, from August 12 – 17, 2021 indicated a 348% increase in the RNA viral load. This is the highest level that the wastewater data has indicated to date. Currently, all of the viral RNA load in the Saskatoon wastewater is contributed by the Delta (B.1.617) variant.

Vaccine Support

The City has worked with the Saskatchewan Health Authority to encourage and support staff and community vaccinations and make vaccine clinics accessible and convenient on a local level.

The City hosted two vaccine clinics specifically for City of Saskatoon staff. These occurred on May 8 and July 5, 2021. These clinics provided an opportunity for staff to register and participate in a clinic specifically for them. At each clinic, close to two hundred staff participated.

To support staff vaccination, the City has ensured staff are aware of the Special Vaccination Leave opportunities, created an internal vaccine information website, provided regular updates on vaccine eligibility and clinic opportunities, shared a staff COVID-19 story in support of vaccination, and provided a digital space for staff to voluntarily share their vaccination selfies to help encourage each other to “stick it to COVID” and finish the fight.

The City has also provided support for the Saskatchewan Health Authority’s vaccine clinics. This support includes: traffic planning and review for the Prairieland Park Drive

Thru Clinic, assisting with clinic logistics, providing onsite support when required, re-sharing of vaccine messaging and opportunities with Saskatoon residents through the City's social media channels and on saskatoon.ca, a unique Mayor's challenge between Saskatoon and Regina to generate excitement in both cities, support of clinics specifically for specific and harder to reach sectors of our community, and the ongoing support of pop-up clinics.

The City has hosted pop-up clinics in many civic facilities including Leisure Centers, indoor arenas, outdoor pools, paddling pools and spray pads, at City Hall, in the downtown Transit Terminal, in parks and has continued to work with the Saskatchewan Health Authority to identify pop-up clinic locations.

A large pop-up clinic occurred on June 19, 2021 on 21st Street. City staff provided significant support to the Saskatchewan Health Authority to have this clinic occur very quickly after the idea was presented. The City is supporting a team currently working on a planned pop-up clinic on 20th Street in September.

During the extreme heat over the summer the City supported pop-up clinics at the Food Truck Wars and the Fringe with the deployment of the Saskatoon Fire Department's Mobile Command Unit (Command 9) and staff members. Command 9 provided a location for the Saskatchewan Health Authority to reconstitute the vaccine to protect it from the extreme heat.

The City is committed to continuing to support the Saskatchewan Health Authority's vaccination plan.

Staff Safety

The City values staff safety and believes in "Safety in all we do." This value has been at the foundation of all COVID-19 related decision making since the start of the pandemic. We will continue to follow this value in our decision making.

Section 3-8 of *The Saskatchewan Employment Act* requires employers to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker. This is known as the general duty clause. It's a way of protecting workers in a situation where no specific regulation or standard applies. Employers apply the same risk management strategies to the hazard of COVID-19 as they would to any other hazard.

Establishing and maintaining a healthy and safe workplace requires the City to systematically identify hazards and ensure the follow through and implementation of appropriate controls. This risk management process provides the City with the opportunity to recognize health and safety problems before they result in injury or illness.

Hierarchy of Controls

- There are five basic ways (elimination, substitution, engineering, administrative, personal protective equipment) to control hazards which form a hierarchy (See Appendix 2 Hierarchy of Controls)
- This means that the first control, elimination, shall be the first control to be considered, and is the most effective.
- If elimination is not possible then the next control shall be considered, and so on.

In order to protect staff health and safety several controls may need to be put in place.

Current Health and Safety Measures

On Monday August 30, 2021 the City returned to full COVID-19 Exposure Control Plans throughout all departments. These were in place prior to the lifting of the Provincial Public Health Orders on July 11, 2021. In consideration of the current COVID-19 situation, as outlined earlier in the report, the City determined that returning to full COVID-19 Exposure Control Plans was required for staff safety in order to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace.

The City has staff performing a variety of different work. There are many different Exposure Control Plans in the City, but there are key measures that are applied to all staff members reporting to the workplace.

Components of the Exposure Control Plan for all staff include:

- Mandatory daily Fit for Duty Form completed by all staff prior to entering the workplace. The City did not lift this requirement on July 11, all staff reporting to the workplace have been required to fill out this declaration on a daily basis. The Fit for Duty Form identifies staff with any symptoms of COVID-19 and directs them to not enter the workplace and to contact 811 for further direction. This assists in identifying and eliminating COVID-19 as a hazard in the workplace,
- Installation of transparent barriers where staff are in close proximity to other staff or to visitors,
- Moving workstations so staff are at least two metres apart in all directions and do not face each other,
- Staggering shifts and breaks and cohorting staff to minimize exposure,
- Increased ventilation where possible,
- Enhanced cleaning and sanitizing, and
- Medical grade masks to be worn when indoors or in an enclosed space.

Some tasks within the City require close contact work and are critical for the services the City provides. Enhanced Exposure Control Plans have been initiated for these tasks to protect against the transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace.

On May 12, 2021 the City began offering voluntary COVID-19 Rapid Testing to all staff reporting to a worksite. COVID-19 Rapid Testing is an important tool in identifying the COVID-19 hazard before it enters the workplace. If it is not consistently applied to all at

risk, or mandated based on risk, it is not considered to be a defensible safety control as part of our due diligence as an employer. As COVID-19 is spread via human transmission, all employees that work near other workers or members of the public are at risk.

With the lifting of the Government of Saskatchewan Public Health Orders and the current COVID-19 situation in Saskatoon, the Administration has determined that it must move to a more aggressive approach to staff safety than it has in the past and consider further measures. Since the removal of the Public Health Orders there has been a steady increase in COVID-19 activity in Saskatoon, as outlined earlier in this report. Without the Public Health Orders, the responsibility is on the employer (City) to take the steps necessary to provide additional safety measures from the hazard (COVID-19) currently deemed out-of-control in our community.

In September the Administration will mandate all staff reporting to the workplace to participate in weekly COVID-19 Rapid Testing. Administration is taking this aggressive safety step following our core value that “safety matters.”

In the Hierarchy of Controls, the highest, most effective safety control is eliminating the hazard from the workplace. Mandatory weekly Rapid Testing of all staff reporting to the workplace is the highest level of control the City can implement. The City has not instituted this control in the past because there were Provincial Public Health Orders in place that limited the spread of COVID-19 in our community. Since the lifting of these orders the COVID-19 situation in Saskatoon has changed significantly and the hazard in our community requires a higher level of control than we have had in place previously.

The [Government of Canada](#) has stated that COVID-19 Rapid Tests are fast, easy and safe. They provide results in 15 minutes. It is important to note that not everyone who has COVID-19 will show symptoms and that even fully vaccinated individuals can catch and transmit COVID-19. COVID-19 Rapid Tests are for asymptomatic individuals. The mandatory daily Fit for Duty Form helps to identify staff with symptoms of COVID-19. Mandatory weekly Rapid Testing will identify staff who are both asymptomatic and positive for COVID-19. These two processes combined help to eliminate the hazard (COVID-19) from entering our workplaces and therefore help to keep our staff safe from workplace transmission.

It is critical that Rapid Testing be mandatory for all staff reporting to the workplace regardless of role or their vaccine status. Without the testing being mandatory for all staff reporting to the workplace there is a higher likelihood of COVID-19 entering the workplace, infecting other staff members, requiring other staff members to self-isolate, causing outbreaks, and impacting service delivery. Appendix 3 COVID-19 Rapid Testing in the workplace illustrates how mandatory weekly rapid testing helps to eliminate workplace transmission.

The Saskatoon Fire Department’s (SFD) Firefighter/Paramedics (FF/P) are trained in administering the test and have been conducting the voluntary Rapid Tests to date.

The SFD has indicated that it will continue to support the mandatory COVID-19 Rapid Testing plan.

While there are many logistical considerations still to be determined, our voluntary COVID-19 Rapid Testing processes will be used to assist in the expansion to the mandatory Rapid Testing process. These processes include procedures to continue to ensure the privacy of staff is protected. The City will not be collecting the results of the tests but will be tracking that staff have completed the weekly test. In the case of a positive Rapid Test, the FF/P will contact the staff member directly. The staff member will then contact 811 and follow the Saskatchewan Health Authority COVID-19 processes as directed.

In order to accommodate all staff, the mandatory Rapid Testing will occur throughout the week, including evenings and weekends, to ensure all staff reporting to the workplace can meet the requirement of 1 test every 7 days. Rapid Testing locations will be set up throughout the City to ensure staff access.

NEXT STEPS

The City is continually monitoring the COVID-19 situation in Saskatoon. As throughout this pandemic, as the situation changes, we will adjust our safety protocols.

APPENDICES

1. Assessed Risk of Epidemic Transmission
2. Hierarchy of Controls
3. COVID-19 Rapid Testing

Report Approval

Written by: Pamela Goulden-McLeod, Director Emergency Management

Reviewed by: Reche McKeague, Solicitor
Angela Wilcox, Manager, Client Services OH&S

Approved by: Jeff Jorgenson, City Manager