



Renfrew County and District Health Unit

"Optimal Health for All in Renfrew County and District"

July 24th, 2024

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
premier@ontario.ca

Hon. Sylvia Jones
Deputy Premier and Minister of Health Government of Ontario
sylvia.jones@ontario.ca

Hon. Andrea Khanjin
Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks Government of Ontario
minister.mecp@ontario.ca

Dear Honourable Premier and Ministers,

Re: Continued Support for Infectious Disease Wastewater Surveillance and Modern Case and Contact Management Software

On June 25th, 2024, the Board of Health for the Renfrew County and District Health Unit passed a resolution to request continued provincial funding and support for important public health enhancements achieved during the pandemic: cross-provincial infectious disease wastewater surveillance and modernized case and contact management software (i.e., the Case and Contact Management Solution (CCM)).

The Board has reviewed and supports the letter issued by Peterborough Public Health dated June 20th, 2024, regarding [continued provincial coordination and support of wastewater surveillance](#).

In May and April of 2024, the province announced discontinuation of funding for both initiatives. This means that there will no longer be local infectious disease wastewater surveillance in Renfrew County and District (or most other communities across Ontario) and that public health units must revert to using an older software platform for case and contact management with less functionality.

Wastewater surveillance of infectious diseases, previously supported by the Ministry of Environment, Conservation, and Parks, is a novel approach, and one of the successful innovations scaled up to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a cost-effective means of providing timely information on disease spread throughout the community that doesn't rely on individual testing, which is costly, has delays, and doesn't reflect the whole community. For example, individual testing for COVID-19 and influenza is limited to a small group of eligible people. Community members across Ontario have voiced the importance of this information to inform their risk assessments, and RCDHU has included it in its weekly Respiratory Illness Data Summary.

Additional benefits of wastewater surveillance that are being explored include the ability to rapidly identify emerging pathogens that may be circulating in a community, such as H5N1 (avian flu), and the potential to rapidly identify outbreaks in vulnerable populations, such as long-term care homes. These are exciting opportunities to better protect health that are only beginning to be explored.

The province has highlighted that there is a federal wastewater surveillance system. However, Toronto is the only city in Ontario included in the Federal program. Without ongoing support from the province, local wastewater surveillance will no longer be possible.

Additionally, the Case and Contact Management Solution (CCM) was a modern, highly functional software platform for COVID-19 case, contact, and outbreak management. CCM enabled greater efficiency, collaboration, and real-time analytics of disease trends; it was a key enabler for an effective pandemic response.

Public health units have been advised that CCM will eventually be superseded by a more all-encompassing, modern provincial platform. However, public health unit work would be more efficient and effective if the existing improvements were maintained until the full vision for Ontario's public health information technology infrastructure is realized.

Infectious disease pandemics cause immense mortality, morbidity, and economic burdens. It is essential that we learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and maintain investments in public health preparedness so that we can reduce and mitigate the harms of the next pandemic. Already, H5N1 avian flu is being closely monitored for its pandemic potential. A robust infectious disease wastewater surveillance system and highly functional case and contact management software are key enhancements from the COVID-19 pandemic that should be sustained so that we are more prepared for the next pandemic.

Sincerely,



Joanne King
Chair, Board of Health
Renfrew County and District Health Unit

cc: The Honourable John Yakabuski, MPP
Renfrew County and District Municipalities
Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)
Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA)
Ontario Boards of Health