
HALDIMAND COUNTY

Report CSS-02-2023 COVID-19 Vaccination Policies Review

For Consideration by Council in Committee on June 20, 2023



OBJECTIVE:

To recommend rescinding division specific COVID-19 vaccination policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. THAT Report CSS-02-2023 Vaccination Policies Review be received;
2. AND THAT the Haldimand County Paramedic Service Vaccination Policy be rescinded in its entirety;
3. AND THAT the Grandview Lodge COVID-19 Immunization Policy be rescinded in its entirety;
4. AND THAT staff be directed to continue to identify and mitigate the risk of infectious disease exposure in the workplace as part of regular and ongoing health and safety plans and in accordance with provincial guidance.

Respectfully submitted: Megan Jamieson, General Manager of Corporate & Social Services

Approved: Cathy Case, Interim Chief Administrative Officer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

In September 2021, Council adopted three distinct COVID-19 vaccination policies that applied to various work groups within the County. The following year, in light of Provincial changes in vaccination requirements and other mandates (screening, masking, etc.), the County policies were reviewed. One of the three policies, which covered all non-health care related services within the County, was rescinded in April 2022. The second policy covering Haldimand County Paramedic Services was amended to remove most requirements, but maintained the requirement for new hires to be fully vaccinated. The third policy covering Grandview Lodge was maintained with minor housekeeping changes. These decisions were predominantly based on the remaining risk in the two sectors, respectively, and aligned with Provincial advice at the time.

Staff committed to continue monitoring federal, provincial, local, and sector specific influences, and bring back information to Council when there is evidence to suggest the removal of vaccination requirements for either group. Recent announcements have suggested that loosening current measures would not have an adverse effect on the workforce and the ability to provide adequate resident and patient care, prompting staff to bring this issue forward now. For a variety of reasons, staff are recommending rescinding both remaining policies in their entirety, meaning that vaccination for staff would no longer be required. In turn, staff recommend refocusing efforts in infection prevention and exposure control measures generally, as an ongoing health issue, in conjunction with the County's Joint Health and Safety committees, Public Health, and Employee Health Team.

BACKGROUND:

In September 2021, during emergent response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario, Council adopted three vaccination policies: The Haldimand County Vaccination Policy; the Haldimand County Paramedic Service COVID-19 Vaccination Policy, and the Grandview Lodge COVID-19 Immunization Policy. As outlined in Report [CSS-04-2021](#), each of these policies were approved based on the sector specific need to respond to the imminent threat of COVID-19 on staff and public, considering both the Employer's legislative duties and service level commitments. The policies were informed by scientific evidence at the time, as communicated by the Province. Additionally, at the time the policies were implemented, the Haldimand-Norfolk health district had one of the lowest rates of vaccination in the province.

Six months later, and two years after the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Province of Ontario began removing vaccination requirements and relaxing other mandates. The Ministry shifted from mandating measures to a guidance-based approach in supporting long-term care homes and public health experts updated testing directives and recommended measures across a variety of sectors (screening, masking, etc.). In light of these changes, staff brought forward Report [CSS-01-2022](#) and, in April 2022, Council approved the following:

- a) The Haldimand County Vaccination Policy was rescinded in its entirety. This policy pertained to general staff and County representatives, including volunteer firefighters, elected officials, board appointees, students and the Haldimand County Library Board. It required disclosure of vaccination status and routine testing for unvaccinated individuals;
- b) The Haldimand County Paramedic Service COVID-19 Vaccination Policy be amended to remove the requirement for mandatory vaccination, and all provisions associated directly to that requirement, while maintaining the requirement for new hires to be fully vaccinated (two doses); and;
- c) The Grandview Lodge COVID-19 Vaccination Policy be maintained including the requirement for new hires to be fully vaccinated (two doses), with minor housekeeping changes and removal of redundancies such as Ministry reporting requirements, and that staff report back to Council if evidence supports changes to the policy from a resident safety and a workforce management perspective.

Throughout the spring of 2023, COVID-19 measures continued to loosen across the Province signalling the end of respiratory illness season and the removal of COVID-19 as a heightened threat. The Ministry of Long-Term Care, for the first time, encouraged long-term care homes to revisit their policies and consider allowing all visitors and qualified staff, regardless of their vaccination status. The Ministry noted that this update to requirements is directly related to high vaccine uptake and the availability of safe and effective antivirals that reduce the risk of severe outcomes to residents in today's environment. This announcement aligns with messaging from the World Health Organization, on May 5, 2023, stating that COVID-19 is now considered an established and ongoing health issue which no longer constitutes a public health emergency.

As a result of these significant changes in advice/environmental landscape, staff have reviewed the two existing policies with the lens of whether or not they are still necessary, in any capacity.

ANALYSIS:

The vaccination policies adopted by Council in September 2021 were intended to address the following:

- Safety of the public;
- Safety of staff and County representatives;

- Return to the intended work environments;
- Ensure continuity of services to the public with adequate staffing levels and at reasonable costs.

The recommendations were based on scientific advice and data at the time of adoption. As the environment changed, staff continued to heed Ministry guidance based on evidence and expertise, while keeping the above goals top of mind when establishing or maintaining appropriate safety measures in our two healthcare related divisions. It is with these initial goals in mind that the two remaining policies have been carefully reviewed again by staff, ultimately resulting in the staff recommendation to rescind both policies, for the various reasons outlined below.

1. Reduced Ongoing Risk to Severe Outcomes

Herd Immunity is a term used when a large portion of a community (the herd) becomes immune to a disease. While the general population has not established an immunity to the COVID-19 virus, it appears that the risk of exposure is less threatening in terms of severe outcomes. The Province has indicated that this in large part due to the rate of vaccination across Ontario. As of June 1, 2023, the Haldimand-Norfolk vaccination rate for at least two doses stands at 73.1%, in comparison to Ontario 80.5% and Canada 80.9%.

As noted, the World Health Organizations ended the public health emergency related to COVID-19, indicating the significant threat to the general public, including in the healthcare sector, is no longer imminent. This is an important indication of the reduced ongoing risk to staff and public.

The County should continue to encourage staff to remain vaccinated for their own protection, and to protect their co-workers, residents and patients. However, in light of this significant change in imminent threat, it is possible to continue to address the four key goals without a specific policy in place, and without the requirement for staff to be vaccinated. Therefore, requiring vaccination is no longer necessary.

2. Sector-specific trends

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, staff have networked with industry leaders and our neighbouring municipalities and homes to ensure our decisions are in line with the sector.

While Paramedic Services were required to have a policy addressing COVID-19, required vaccination was not mandatory in this sector. As a result, municipalities and hospitals with ambulance services took varying approaches to vaccination requirements. Following the Ministry of Health decision to no longer require policies for this group, the vast majority of municipalities who had approved policies, opted to rescind.

With respect to long-term care homes, until recently many homes maintained some level of vaccination requirements. However, in light of the context outlined above and, the encouragement from Ministry of Long-Term Care to review, this sector is seeing more and more homes rescinding their policies.

Staff have confirmed that all neighbouring municipalities including City of Hamilton, Niagara Region, and Norfolk County no longer require staff to be vaccinated within their long-term care home(s), nor Paramedic Services; and City of Brantford is the same in Emergency Services, with a review of their Long-Term Care policy currently underway. Staff are aware that the other long-term care home in Dunnville, Edgewater Gardens also no longer requires staff to be vaccinated. Of the two remaining private sector long-term care homes in Haldimand, one has removed vaccination requirements for existing staff so those on extended leaves are able to return while continuing to require new hires to be vaccinated; and staff were unable to obtain current information on the other home in Haldimand, but will provide a verbal update at Council

in Committee if the information has been received. Accordingly, rescinding both policies within Haldimand County would be in line with what is being seen with most of the surrounding area.

3. Adequate Staffing Levels

Staffing levels in Paramedic Services have remained consistent, however Haldimand County continues to struggle in hiring and retaining staff at Grandview Lodge, in particular Registered staff (nursing), personal support workers and dietary aides. Based on the vaccination rate in Haldimand and Norfolk Counties, there is an indication that we may be overlooking a portion of the population that could potentially be hired. As we see neighbouring municipalities remove requirements for vaccination there is a greater likelihood of missing out on these potential candidates. Removing the requirement for vaccination at Haldimand County would expand our candidate pool and consider all eligible applicants.

It is important to note that, the last time the policies were reviewed the Paramedic policy maintained vaccination requirements for new hires. This was intended to maintain the high level of vaccination levels in that sector and ensure appropriate staffing levels in the situation where adjusting of work/schedules may be required to address outbreaks or positive cases. However, based on up to date information, it has now been confirmed that even in the case of an outbreak in the community or long-term care home, protective actions would be identical for vaccinated or unvaccinated employees. As a result, there is no longer a requirement to identify who is and who is not vaccinated for the purposes of deploying staff.

Should Council adopt this recommendation, there are two staff currently on a leave of absence with Grandview Lodge that could return to work in the imminent future. There is some risk in that removing the vaccination requirements at Grandview Lodge will be negatively viewed by current staff who were required to provide proof of vaccination in the past. However, based on anecdotal conversation, it is believed that the majority of staff do understand the significant change in environment and the need to maintain policy that reflects the current needs of the home. Likewise, scheduling and staffing remain the top pain points for staff, so if this change can potentially improve the ability to recruit staff, it is believed to outweigh any negative feelings of rescinding the policy.

FINANCIAL/LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:

There are no direct financial implications associated with the revoking of vaccination policies. There are however, two outstanding grievances related to actions taken in response to the COVID-19 policies which remain confidential and cannot be described in detail in this report. It is not anticipated that the grievances will be impacted in any way as a result of revoking these policies. If Council wishes to discuss the grievances, it is suggested that the discussion move into Closed Session. Otherwise, staff will continue working with the County's solicitor to progress through the normal process for each grievance, within the delegated authority that Council has granted to the relevant management staff.

STAKEHOLDER IMPACTS:

The go forward approach being recommended is in direct response to the recent announcements by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Long-Term Care respective of the pandemic and ongoing conditions. The recommended course of action balances the need for the employer to provide a safe work environment, adequately address public and resident safety, while making good business decisions based on current conditions and advice.

This report was provided to the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit for review and comment; feedback has been included within.

REPORT IMPACTS:

Agreement: No

By-law: No

Budget Amendment: No

Policy: Yes

REFERENCES:

1. [Haldimand County Paramedic Service COVID-19 Vaccination Policy](#)
2. [Grandview Lodge COVID-19 Vaccination Policy](#)
3. [Report CSS-04-2021 Haldimand County Vaccination Policy](#)
4. [Report CSS-01-2022 Review of COVID-19 Vaccination Policies](#)

ATTACHMENTS:

None.