

June 20, 2024

Hon. Sylvia Jones
Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
Government of Ontario
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Hon. Andrea Khanjin
Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks
Government of Ontario
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Dear Honourable Ministers,

On Wednesday, June 12, 2024, the Board of Health for Peterborough Public Health approved a motion to request continued provincial coordination and support of wastewater surveillance across broad communities including the Peterborough Public Health region.

On May 30, 2024, PPH learned that the Provincial government will discontinue funding for wastewater surveillance throughout the province, including the local partnership with Trent University as of July 31st (early end to their current contract) despite continued relevance and importance of this information to residents of our region. The public health field has come to understand the broad utility of wastewater surveillance, not only for COVID-19 but for other infectious disease threats. In recent months it has proven useful for RSV, Influenza, MPox, and Polio.

COVID-19 continues to kill and have a greater severity than other respiratory viruses. In our small region there have been 188 deaths due to COVID-19 through the pandemic including 12 confirmed deaths in 2024 (396 in Ontario) and in 2023 there were 35 deaths (2,063 in Ontario). By comparison, there has been one confirmed outbreak-related death from influenza to-date in 2024.

The provincial decision to discontinue funding for wastewater surveillance comes at the same time that the province is also shutting down the Case and Contact Management (CCM) surveillance tool provincially, which will mean that we will lose easy access to individual case count data for COVID-19, another local surveillance indicator of risk. Therefore, the importance and relevance of wastewater surveillance data is even greater.

Locally, wastewater surveillance has been an exemplary collaboration with Trent University and has been led by Professor Christopher Kyle. The Trent University partnership has been nationally and globally innovative, leading important research work that had not only local implications for the COVID-19 pandemic, but has resulted in internationally relevant research output with a peer reviewed publication in Canada's national journal and additional research outputs anticipated.

For the community of the Peterborough Public Health region since the Omicron wave of COVID-19 in 2021, individual-level testing has not been feasible and accessible. For this reason, wastewater has been the primary indicator of community transmission of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses and informs the Peterborough

Public Health COVID-19 Risk Index, the most visited page on the Peterborough Public Health website (4,952 distinct views). Beyond individual-level use, we have been informed that many community organizations and institutions rely on the Risk Index to establish guidance for respiratory virus precautions.

The provincial decision to cut funding early to this program, and not renew funding on an annual basis comes as a surprise to the public health community, who believed that wastewater surveillance would be an established function on a long-term basis. Although there does appear to be some possibility of funding that may continue federally for certain large urban sites (e.g., Toronto, Ottawa), Peterborough and rural sites do not appear to be in the scope of the forthcoming federal program. There was no duplication of work, and the federal program will be far more narrow than the previous provincial program.

Termination of this program will be a great loss of local infrastructure and capacity to support wastewater surveillance, in particular with the introduction of new infectious disease threats and preparedness for pandemics into the future. The tracking of mpox and polio were recent examples of its use in detecting emerging infectious diseases, and with ongoing H5N1 transmission in the United States, there is an immediate possibility of needing wastewater surveillance for detection of H5N1.

This will continue to be the case on an ongoing basis, and one of, if not the most, important mechanisms of public health surveillance, particularly in a cost-effective, non-intrusive community snapshot manner.

Your support of continued wastewater surveillance as an early warning system would benefit all local residents and maintain world class status in disease surveillance.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

Councillor Joy Lachica
Chair, Board of Health

cc: Professor Christopher Kyle, Trent University
Local MPPs
Hon. Mike Holland, Minister of Health, Health Canada
Ontario Boards of Health