

## Board of Health Briefing Note

**To:** Chair and Members of the Board of Health

**Date:** January 27, 2021

**Topic:** **COVID-19 First Wave Response Evaluation; Local Business, Organization, and Community Groups**

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Timiskaming Board of Health:

1. **Receive the report 'COVID-19 First Wave Response Evaluation; Local Business, Organization, and Community Groups' for information.**

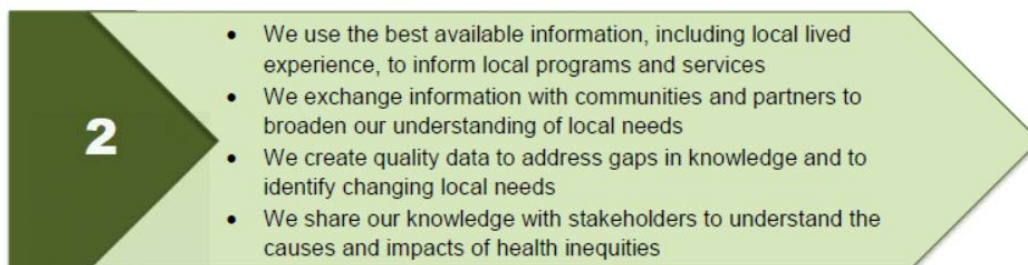
### Issue

Evaluation is an important component of evidence-informed public health and it also has an important role in the emergency management cycle- how we prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies. In a framework for public health emergency preparedness for infectious and non-infectious emergencies developed by Public Health Ontario, learning and evaluation is one of 11 essential elements identified (PHO, 2020). In response to a short duration emergency, an after-action review may be undertaken to review what happened, identify areas for improvement in preparedness and response and identify gaps, best practices and learning opportunities (ECDC, 2020). Evaluating a response to a single emergency is important to identify strengths and successes and inform improvement actions and establishing timelines for change (PHO, 2020). In-action reviews aim to not only review what has already happened, but to quickly identify readily implementable actions to immediate and pressing issues that will improve the current response, as well as look ahead to emerging issues that may require a shift in policy, procedures and responses (ECDC, 2020). For the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing evaluation efforts as well as a post-pandemic evaluation (after-action review) will be necessary to ensure an adequate public health response, aid in recovery and to contribute to the cycle of continuous quality improvement and resilience in emergency preparedness and response planning (ECDC, 2020).

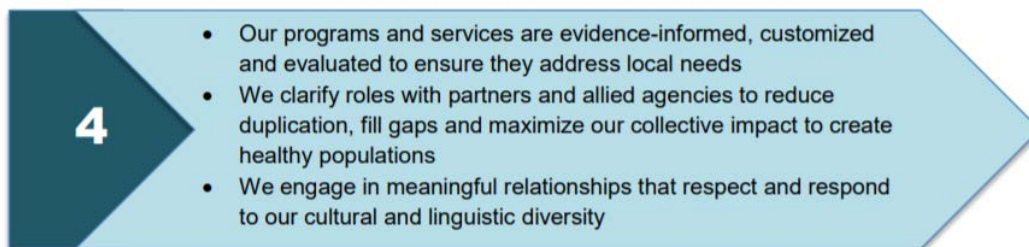
### Ontario Public Health Standards (2018) and Timiskaming Health Unit Strategic Plan 2019-2023

Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic is a long duration emergency, THU initiated ongoing COVID-19 response evaluation evaluations. This work directly contributes to meeting requirements and expected outcomes in the Ontario Public Health Standards (2018) Emergency Management and Effective Public Health Practice Foundational Standards and supports the following THU 2019-2023 strategic directions 2 and 4:

#### We create, share and exchange knowledge



## We adapt to address the diverse and changing local needs



### Background

To support effective public health emergency response practice and in alignment with our 2019-2023 strategic plan, THU is evaluating its ongoing response to COVID-19 to better understand the response and to plan for ongoing improvements. To do this, THU has used a comprehensive approach gathering feedback both internally from staff and externally from community members, partners, and stakeholders. To date two internal surveys and four external partner surveys have been conducted related to the first wave of COVID-19.

Findings have been shared with senior leadership and management. Reports regarding previous external surveys are publically available on our website [here](#). This Briefing Note shares findings of a survey among Timiskaming businesses, organizations (school boards, childcare) and community groups and builds on the November 2020 Board of Health Briefing Note; [Timiskaming Health Unit COVID-19 First Wave Response Evaluation](#).

Evaluation findings are being used to inform local response efforts and protect our communities by building on aspects of the response that worked well and that should continue or be enhanced during resurgences and future waves. Furthermore, this data has illuminated experiences and lessons learned so far allowing THU to course correct or pivot actions real-time or to apply to future emergency responses.

### External Survey: Local Business, Organization, and Community Group Survey

A bilingual survey was administered through SurveyMonkey from September 24- October 9, 2020 to identify what worked well, what could be improved and what should be continued in THU's COVID-19 response. This survey was sent to local businesses, schools and school boards, childcare and other organizations through internally maintained contact lists and external partners such as the chamber of commerce and advertised through social media. In total, there were 245 respondents to the questionnaire (228 English and 17 French). Respondents identified being part of a private business (38%), 'other' (31%), School or School board (24%), or childcare (10%). Those in the 'other' category included health care, religious organizations, retail, government or retired/unemployed.

The survey contained questions about types and level of support received from THU, negative impacts on businesses and organizations, THU's communication and the public's media usage as well as broader questions about perceptions and trust in THU. Respondents were also asked open ended questions about what actions should be continued or enhanced, what should be improved and what THU should consider for informing future planning related to COVID-19. Highlights from the findings are discussed below.

#### Support from THU:

- **56%** and **68%** of respondents believed that their business' or organization' response was *directly* and *indirectly* supported by THU respectively. **68%** of respondents indicated that their organization received support or resources from THU about how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their workplace

- **50%** of respondents indicated that their business or organization received support to prepare for the various stages of re-opening (1,2, and 3) and **78%** of those who received support said they felt well supported
- **54%** of respondents believed that their business or organization did **not** receive support from THU for *non-COVID-19* related projects and programs

There were comments that were both appreciative of supports provided and those who were wanting more support from THU. Businesses appreciated provided resources such as policies and signs, but also requested more of these to reduce their workload and increase uniformity in the district. Some respondents mentioned challenges connecting with THU staff, however those who were able to connect felt well supported. Several respondents requested more visibility of THU in the community and more enforcement of public health measures.

#### **Perceptions of THU:**

- **72%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that THU’s leadership guided the community COVID-19 response
- **81%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that THU played an important role in the community during the COVID-19 response
- **80%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that THU is a trusted community agency for responding to COVID-19
- **90%** of respondents were very satisfied (49%) or somewhat satisfied (41%) in how THU has responded to the pandemic so far

Respondents took the time to express appreciation for support given by THU and the overall work that has been done in the community during the pandemic. There were a couple of comments expressing anger and distrust towards public health measures and THU.

#### **Communication:**

- **79%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that THU provided clear direction about how they can protect themselves and their family during the COVID-19 response
- **69%** of respondents agreed that THU provided *clear* information and **71%** agreed that THU provided *timely* information during the COVID-19 response
- **72%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that THU’s use of social media, website, radio, and print media kept them well informed about COVID-19 locally
- **63%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that THU provided information that answered questions during the COVID-19 response

Communication was most frequently commented upon. Commenters reported an appreciation of the information provided, including press releases, updates about public health measures, social media, radio and videos from Dr. Corneil, and local case updates. THU’s website and Facebook page were listed as useful sources of information. Comments throughout the survey suggested a need for plain language and easy to read communications, easier website navigation, sector specific guidance, and a need to clarify the COVID19 testing process and exclusion criteria for the public using clear, unambiguous language. French language communications and support were appreciated, and more French language communication was requested a few times during the survey.

#### **Knowledge to Action**

THU management and staff have reviewed all evaluation findings and have implemented multiple actions to continuously improve our response. Specific to the findings from this survey, actions include increasing communications capacity through the addition of a qualified communications staff, adjusting liaison staff

workload, and increasing staffing to support timely communication and direct and indirect supports. THU has also deliberately increased our contact lists for businesses and organizations and increased the frequency of written updates to sectors such as businesses and church/faith groups. Furthermore, THU has maintained weekly calls with Directors of Education, and initiated a regular call with the district Children's Services Manager and Supervisor. In addition, THU continues to strive for plain language communications, prioritize bilingual communications and social media engagement and we have initiated a review of our COVID-19 website for navigability and accessibility (e.g. dedicated sector pages in addition to school and childcare COVID-19 pages).

### **Ongoing Evaluation and Continuous Improvement**

A bilingual survey of Timiskaming residents was conducted from November 3 to December 4. This survey gathered information about health behaviours related to public health measures (mask usage, hand washing, physical distancing), how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected employment and family, mental health & coping mechanisms, and opinions about public health measures, and perceptions about THU's COVID-19 response. Preliminary data has just been transferred to THU from the Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System (RRFSS). In addition to supporting targeted planning of interventions to contain spread, this data will help THU and stakeholders to understand the impact of COVID-19 on our local population as well as vaccine hesitancy.

THU will continue to invite and monitor stakeholder feedback on THU's ongoing COVID-19 response. This information will be used to support our workforce, inform communication strategies and other planning decisions related to COVID-19 as well as ongoing public health work.

Lastly, THU staff are currently exploring the feasibility of a second round of evaluative feedback from internal staff and supporting the development of an evaluation plan for Timiskaming's COVID-19 Vaccination Program.

### **Summary**

Timiskaming Health Unit has been evaluating its COVID-19 first wave response with the aim of understanding successes and challenges to adjust response actions and support emergency response resilience and recovery. Overall, the results to date indicate that THU's response, processes and structures continue to be adequate and effective. Furthermore, many respondents have provided valuable insight on opportunities to improve our response. A detailed report further describes what has worked well, challenges and what could be improved in our response. This report along with others, is publicly available on THU's [website](#).

## REFERENCES

ECDC (2020). Conducting in-action and after-action reviews of the public health response to COVID-19. Stockholm: Retrieved from <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/conducting-action-and-after-action-reviews-public-health-response-covid-19>

Public Health Ontario (2020) Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Public health emergency preparedness framework and indicators: a workbook to support public health practice. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2020.