

Date: November 17, 2021
To: Library Board Members
From: Paul Takala, CEO/Chief Librarian
Subject: Update on HPL's COVID-19 Response

INTRODUCTION

On October 22 the Ontario Premier announced the [Plan to Safely Reopen Ontario and Manage COVID-19 for the Long-Term](#). That plan “outlines the province’s gradual approach to lifting remaining public health and workplace safety measures by March 2022.” More recently, with a moderate increase in cases and the coming cold weather which will lead to more indoor activity, on November 10 the province announced it was pausing easing further restrictions “out of an abundance of caution”ⁱ. With the gradually improving of Hamilton’s vaccination rates, we are making some adjustments to continue to safely provide service as we lay the foundation for operations in 2022. To date, 85.6% of eligible Hamilton residents have received at least one dose and 82.1% are fully vaccinatedⁱⁱ.

ADJUSTING TO THE NEXT PHASE OF THE PANDEMIC

In recent weeks, with some restrictions being relaxed elsewhere, we have been receiving feedback about Member frustration with our lack of in-person activities. Individuals that are fully vaccinated are asking about in-person services, group study and events at HPL. One of the challenges we are now facing and will likely continue to face in the next couple months is adhering to restrictions while recognizing that behaviours are changing and the risk of COVID-19 is declining due to vaccinations.

Hamilton and Ontario have taken a cautious approach to lifting restrictions and all evidence points to this being the fastest way we can get out the pandemic while also minimizing the loss of life and strains to our health care system. We are fortunate to live in a place where public health measures largely inform decision making. As we approach the end of the pandemic, we also need to recognize that people’s behaviours are shaped by their collective experiences. Here are a few examples that illustrate how our recent approach may conflict with people’s current expectations:

- Individuals using services or visiting restaurants where they show their vaccination status and are able to remove their masks indoors. These same individuals are not understanding why we are not able to allow in-person events for those who are fully vaccinated.
- Students not physically distancing with friends and classmates at school and in other places, then visiting the Library and not being able to do homework together.
- People shopping in stores that enforce the mask mandate but largely do not monitor or enforce physical distancing at this stage of the pandemic, while visiting HPL and not being able to sit together.

THE ROLE OF VACCINE VERIFICATION IN ONTARIO PUBLIC LIBRARIES

HPL and most other public libraries in Ontario are closely aligned with their municipalities in terms of staff vaccination verification. We’re doing this to show leadership and support the public health effort. I congratulate Library Board members and Staff for their very positive response. We are

currently at more than 96% Staff compliance with the Vaccine Verification Policy and 100% for the Library Board.

Asking for proof of vaccination (POV) for Library members is more complicated. The current rules in Ontario allow the easing of restrictions in some higher risk settings, like restaurants and gyms, provided visitors show proof of vaccination (POV). Libraries are considered a lower risk environment. The Ontario Library Service (OLS), the provincial agency that supports public libraries issued this clarification about Proof of Vaccine:

- *Regular public library operations and programs eg. Board meetings and children's story time are not subject to proof of vaccine.*
- *Rented library space is subject to proof of vaccine subject to the limitations in O. Reg. 364/20.*
- *Under the Public Libraries Act public library boards may set their own rules for proof of vaccine requirements related to admission to the libraryⁱⁱⁱ*

Between now and when the pandemic restrictions are over, HPL will need to decide which activities we should consider enabling by using POV for members. At this time, except for offering in-person BAAs as an accommodation in special circumstances, we are not planning to approve any additional activities that use POV for members. While we will consider this, there are several things we need to keep in mind:

- The Public Health COVID-19 vaccination clinics at HPL have been very successful. We want this critical work to continue and need to be aware that if we started asking for POV this could create a barrier to some and might undermine some people's perception of us. The converse is also true by not allowing certain activities, but to date we have managed to enhance our overall support and appreciation for our work in the community by our existing approach.
- Staff capacity is still limited as we work on filling vacancies. We need to be careful that we do not add a lot of strain to Staff commitments while we work on building out our core service hours. The logistics of asking for POV may be simple but we would need to consider this.

In conclusion, adding activities that require POV is something we need to be open to if circumstances change. For example, while unlikely, if we were to face a long extension of the restrictions, using POV in some circumstances would likely be unavoidable. The province could also change the regulations, however, for now we are considering piloting a limited number of in-person group activities likely starting early in 2022.

Some may ask why we are allowing small group study and private tutoring while we have not returned to in-person tutoring. The answer is that we are working on phasing back our in-person services and will do so at the appropriate time. In the meantime, we are not going to create unnecessary obstacles to learners gaining help from their friends or a tutor. The rules and responsibilities that govern this kind of private activity are different. Our primary focus remains keeping Staff and Members safe, while also doing as much as we safely can to help Members and the communities we serve get through the pandemic.

THINGS THAT ARE NOT CHANGING

Masks/Face Coverings:

We are not making any changes to our current rules about requiring a face mask, or a face shield

as an accommodation for exempt individuals. The Ontario Government has said that the indoor mask requirement will not be lifted until March 28, 2022 in the absence of any concerning trends. We will continue to monitor developments.

Other Safety Measures:

HPL continues to follow modified cleaning procedures and benefits from enhanced HVAC systems with increased air flow and high-grade filters (MERV 13). We are maintaining access to hand sanitizers and disinfectant wipes for both Staff and Members.

NEXT STEPS – THINGS THAT ARE BEING ADJUSTED

These changes are intended as modest adjustments to help HPL navigate the current phase of the pandemic safely and minimize unnecessary conflict where we can.

Physical Distancing - Supporting but not Strictly Enforcing:

HPL will continue to set-up our spaces, furniture, computers and control overall capacity to support physical distancing. We will not, however, enforce physical distancing for small groups in our spaces. Students working together, for example, will not be asked to separate unless the group gets too big or there are other behavioral issues that come into play. We will not monitor or create obstacles to homework assistance or private tutoring in our spaces.

Capacity and Furniture - Adding Back Some Seating and Computers Where Appropriate:

Throughout the pandemic HPL has set the capacity of our spaces lower than regulations require. Teams will start reviewing branch spaces to look for recommendations of where we can add furniture, keeping in mind we still have distancing requirements. Additional work and planning will take place in a measured and incremental way when capacity limits and distancing requirements ease early next year. This work is starting now but will take a few weeks to review each location.

Drinks Yes – Food Still Not Allowed:

We will allow drinks with the understanding Members should remain masked when not actively drinking. Food will still not be permitted, with the exception of medical need.

Staff Personal International Travel Notification:

With some Canadian Public Health advisories against international travel being lifted or revised, SLT will no longer ask to be informed of international travel by Staff. We encourage everyone to consider carefully any travel plans to ensure you remain safe and be aware that travel is not yet back to normal and there could be further disruptions.

Virtual BAAs:

We will continue to offer virtual BAAs. We are also working on a plan that will start to allow in-person BAAs as an alternative accommodation when virtual appointments cannot meet the Member's needs, provided that the following conditions are met:

- Member shows proof of vaccination if they are of a vaccine eligible age
- Mask mandate is followed. Eye protection (face shield or safety glasses) required when assisting someone who cannot wear a tightly fitted mask and/or if you cannot consistently maintain 2 metres physical distance. HPL Staff may wear a face shield along with their mask in all situations, if preferred.

- We are targeting starting these November 11.

i <https://globalnews.ca/news/8364566/ontario-pauses-further-lifting-of-capacity-restrictions-covid/>

ii <https://www.hamilton.ca/coronavirus/covid-19-vaccine-distribution>

iii <https://resources.olservice.ca/covid-19>