April 23, 2020
The Integrated Northern Health area continues to work on preparing for the implementation of our health system readiness plans. Targeted work on the roll out of new Public Health directives related to long term care and staff cohorting have been the focus of the important work underway this week.

STRENGTHENING OUR OFFENCE
Our offensive strategy aligns with the provincial focus on planning in preparation to respond to a potential surge in the incidence of COVID-19 and taking additional proactive measures to protect our long-term care residents, health care workers, patients, and clients.

Keeping long term care residents safe while maintaining connections with families and culture
We know long-term care residents are one of our most vulnerable populations. We are working to ensure that we are using the best practices of infection prevention and control and keeping clear separation of our staff. We recognize these changes create anxiety, confusion, and alarm among our residents, their families as well as our staff. These measures are in place to manage the safety of our residents and staff while mitigating their risk of potential exposure to COVID-19.

We also recognize many of our residents look to their culture to provide a sense of calm during these troubling times. We are working with our partners in the First Nations and Métis Health to create materials for residents to reconnect with their culture.

In order to keep residents of long-term care and staff safe from COVID-19, delivery restrictions are currently in place for our residents and families. This includes delivery of packages, books and magazines, flowers, food and gifts. This is a result of the virus’ ability to survive on surfaces and our need to decrease the risk of transmission at our facilities.

Several additional measures have been put in place to protect residents and staff in both our stand alone long term care homes and integrated sites providing long-term care and acute services from the transmission of COVID-19.

- As of April 28, 2020, long-term care and personal care homes must ensure that each staff member works in only one facility. Work is underway for implementation of staff cohorting.
- Visiting restrictions remain in place allowing for compassionate reasons only.
- Staff, physicians, learners, trainees, vendors and contractors are being screened daily for respiratory illness symptoms they enter any SHA facility or program.
- Staff and physicians who work in patient/resident care areas or travel through those areas are now required to wear a mask.
- Outbreak protocols for long term care homes are in place. These include direction on cohorting staff including break time and location restrictions, wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), enhanced cleaning, dining separation requirements, and compassionate visits.
- Directions to staff to change into their uniform at work and then change into regular clothes when finishing shift. Clothes are to be bagged and laundered after each shift.
- Dining changes to meet Public Health directives regarding group sizes and social distancing.
- Strict adherence to best practices in infection prevention and control through enhanced cleaning.
• Group activities have been temporarily suspended including activities from outside presenters/performers.
• Additional precautions for separating resident’s personal items are in place.
• Reduced on-site/in-home visits and implementation of virtual care/consultation by health care professionals.
• Reduced lab collection; however processes are in place to manage diagnostics as directed by Physicians.
• Use of separate entrances and fire doors to separates wings and create barriers where infrastructure allows.

**Visiting for Compassionate Reasons**

Temporary changes to visitor restrictions for compassionate care have been updated for all Saskatchewan Health Authority facilities. The SHA continues to ask for the public's support and cooperation to contain the spread of the COVID-19 illness by following the new visiting restrictions.

**During this unprecedented time, visitors are NOT permitted in any Saskatchewan Health Authority operated hospitals, clinics, community and continuing care facilities, except for compassionate reasons.** We recognize how difficult this is for patients and families, but this decision is guided by the need to protect our patients and health care teams during COVID-19.

We recognize how difficult the change to visiting for compassionate reasons only has been on our residents and their families. Frontline staff are working very hard to keep our residents safe and also help to maintain connections between residents and their families. Learnings from other jurisdictions regarding the quick spread of COVID-19 in health-care facilities are being applied in Canada, Saskatchewan and as a result, our communities with the best interests and safety of those in our care as our highest priority. Limiting visitors and the numerous precautions being taken by health-care providers will go a long way in protecting our most vulnerable residents.

Be sure to review the latest information on visitor restrictions and what defines compassionate reasons at [saskatchewan.ca/COVID19](http://saskatchewan.ca/COVID19) under Public Health Measures - Guidance for Health Care Facilities.

**Public Health and Community Care**

**Testing**

The Integrated Northern continues testing across northern Saskatchewan and has been occurring since before pandemic was declared. In addition to testing already occurring, specific testing sites have been set up in 22 communities across the north as well as numerous sites on many First Nations. Testing for COVID-19 is available **by referral only** and not for walk-in testing.

Patients are advised to use this [self-assessment tool](http://saskatchewan.ca/COVID19) to determine if they should be tested for COVID-19. Those who fit the criteria and suspect they may have COVID-19 can obtain a referral to a community testing site by phoning 811 or contacting their family physician, their nurse practitioner or their local Public Health Communicable Disease Control office.

Addresses are provided to patients after referrals are made and testing is booked. Patients will be informed of the address during those conversations. A list of testing locations can be found on [saskatchewan.ca/COVID19](http://saskatchewan.ca/COVID19).

**Precautionary Health Advisory Issued for the north**

Out of an abundance of caution, the Saskatchewan Health Authority along with the Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority recently issues a precautionary health warning to the public after a positive test was traced to reports of a number of COVID-19 cases identified at an oil sands facility north of Fort McMurray.
In recognition that there are close connections between communities with regular interprovincial travel for work and other reasons, there is a potential for community transmission with continued non-essential travel between communities across the border.

As such, regional Medical Health Officers are advising against all non-essential travel between far North Saskatchewan and the Fort McMurray area effective immediately and until further notice.

We are also strongly recommending that effective immediately, all northern Saskatchewan residents self-isolate for fourteen days upon return from northern Alberta. During that period of self-isolation they should monitor themselves for any symptoms of COVID-19. These include: fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, chills, diminished sense of smell, body aches, shortness of breath, and breathing difficulties. They should call HealthLine 811 or their community health centre for evaluation and advice if they develop any of those symptoms.

**Population Health - Stay the Course**

The support of the community is paramount in helping to successfully implement all changes and we continue to look for opportunities to support each other through these unprecedented situations. We need everyone to continue to do the right thing and that includes:

- Stay at home unless you need to go out to get essential supplies, like groceries or medication or if you need to seek medical help.
- Social distancing is extremely important! This means keeping your physical distance, stay 2 meters apart from each other.
- Only interact with people you live with. Try not to interact with people outside of your own household.
- You need to be washing your hands frequently with soap and water.
- Do not touch your face with unwashed hands.
- If you cough, cough into your elbow.
- Clean surfaces in your home that are touched frequently, like your counters, tables, water taps, refrigerator door, tv remotes, cell phones.

We are committed to providing updated weekly progress reports on surge planning and the upcoming changes you may expect to see.

**STRENGTHENING OUR DEFENSE**

**Emergency Departments still open**

The Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) reminds residents to continue to access available emergency departments (EDs) and hospitals for the care patients need. Local EDs and hospitals remain safe places for individuals to go for acute care services.

Hospital emergency departments (EDs), cancer services, and urgent and emergent medical imaging (x-ray) and surgical services continue to be provided. Emergency Medical Services (EMS) also continues to meet patient needs.

If you feel unwell and think you require urgent or emergent care, call 911 or go to a hospital emergency department. **Remember, medical professionals are there to care for you, just as they were before the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The SHA has taken precautions to ensure a safe and protected care environment for all patients. Among the steps we have implemented are enhancing screening of patients to ensure the right precautions are being taken, increased cleaning of the care environment and equipment, and limiting visitors and public use of SHA facilities.