April 23, 2020

The Saskatchewan Health Authority has based our response to the COVID-19 pandemic on a strategy of contain, delay, mitigate and population health promotion. The SHA continues to implement health system readiness plans outlined on April 8, 2020, while considering emerging trends and modelling information nationally and internationally. We anticipate sharing updated modelling information with our health-care teams and public next week.

This week’s update focuses on the important work underway to strengthen our offence related to long-term care.

STRENGTHENING OUR OFFENCE

The SHA offensive strategy focuses on actions being taken to tackle COVID-19 in the areas of Public Health, Community Care and other proactive measures to protect health-care workers, and our patients, residents and clients.

Continuing to Enhance Protections for Long-Term Care Residents and Staff

On April 17, Saskatchewan’s Chief Medical Health Officer’s public health order was updated to include the following:

- As of April 28, 2020, long-term care and personal care homes must ensure that each staff member works in only one facility. A care home may seek approval from a medical health officer to permit a staff member to work in more than one facility if they are unable to ensure adequate staffing levels as a result of complying with this order.

This public health order now also includes personal care homes and formalizes existing requirements for long-term care and affiliate care homes, including health screening and masking while on shift.

Daily workforce screening for long-term care began weeks ago

In early April, to protect our most vulnerable residents, the SHA began implementing screening programs for all those working at all long-term care facilities, ensuring no one coming into our care homes was experiencing any influenza-like illness symptoms.

By implementing safety measures such as screening and masking procedures, reducing group activities, and limiting visitors, we have been successful in reducing the spread of COVID 19 in our LTC facilities and affiliate homes. We are happy to report, to date, not one resident has tested positive in any LTC and affiliate homes in Regina.

This is such important work, but also difficult work. We recognize that visitor restrictions are particularly challenging for our residents and their families. Limiting visitors for compassionate reasons only has meant the majority of our residents are not able to have face to face visits with family and friends. To support our residents during this time, many homes have implemented pen pal programs, virtual visiting options (iPads), small group activities, special menu options, and more.

We also want to recognize our LTC and affiliate staff and physicians that have been leading the way with the implementation of the visitor screening policy, followed by the staff screening and masking policy and other facility changes, to support safe care. Your dedication to these safety measures has been an example for the rest of the system to learn and implement.
Provincial workforce screening process, continuous masking implemented last week

On April 14, 2020, the SHA announced new screening and masking requirements for all health care providers. Starting April 15, staff, physicians, learners, trainees, vendors and contractors are subject to daily screening as they enter any SHA facility or program area to ensure they do not have any respiratory symptoms. As an added level of protection, all staff and physicians who work in a clinical care area/facility where there will be direct or indirect contact with patients/residents/clients will be wearing a mask at all times.

In Regina, the level of collaboration, engagement and dedication by SHA staff, physicians and leaders to implement the screening process and masking so quickly was a feat we’re particularly proud to celebrate.

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 healthcare 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 under Public Health Measures - Guidance for Health Care Facilities.

Public Health and Community Care

Testing Targets

The SHA is finalizing its strategy to ramp up testing capacity up to 1,500 tests per day by the end of April. Over the last 2 weeks on average we test almost 100 people a day at our testing site. We are encouraging everyone with any COVID-19 symptoms, cough, fever, sore throat, to call Healthline 811 or their family doctor to inquire about testing. In Regina, we have the capacity to see over 500 patients a day in our testing site and also offer mobile testing for those less mobile.

Assessment and Treatment Sites

The purpose of the COVID-19 Assessment and Treatment Sites is to provide in-person intermediate care, assessment and treatment for individuals presenting with escalating symptoms consistent with COVID-19, those confirmed positive with COVID-19 who have other health conditions, or those in self-isolation due to travel or a public health directive. The intent of these sites is to reduce in-person visits to Emergency Rooms, other primary care clinics and physician clinics.

Services are similar to what an individual would expect to receive during an examination at a physician’s office or primary care clinic, but for COVID-19 only. This may include services such as diagnostic imaging and IV antibiotics. All patients require a referral to the COVID-19 Assessment and Treatment Sites before arrival.

Last week, from April 13 to 18, the Regina Assessment and Treatment site has received between 30-40 referrals per day.

- Approximately 60% of referrals require in person assessments; with 40% requiring phone assessments
• Working together with Medical Imaging, Acute care, Registration service, the Assessment site team as secured 7 day a week access to diagnostic services in the community, after hour urgent diagnostics with a direct referral to Medical Imaging at RGH and direct acute admissions bypassing the need for an emergency room visit on admission
  o This partnership ensures timely assessment, intervention, and care for these patients; and reduces the burden on the emergency room resources.

Contact Tracing
Contact tracing by SHA Public Health staff is underway around the province, including small communities and communities in the north. In Regina we have an experienced team actively working to track down all contacts of COVID positive clients. The team has recently scaled up from 3 to over 20 providers who can do this work. The team is able to expand as needed to support more than 400 contacts a day. To meet contact tracing demand, a load leveling process system will be implemented to balance demand and capacity.

How does Contact Tracing Work?
Contact tracing begins when positive lab results are received. The person who has a positive result is contacted by Public Health, and then a contact list is created based on information provided. Public Health subsequently notifies and assesses everyone who came into contact with an individual who has tested positive for COVID-19. Contact tracing is an essential component of mitigating further spread of the virus.

As contact tracing investigations are ongoing, the SHA reminds everyone to take extra precautions to reduce the risk of exposure and transmission, including thorough and frequent hand-washing, coughing into your arm, avoiding touching your face, monitoring yourself for any symptoms of COVID-19, and following guidelines for physical distancing.

Working Together with Our Community
In Regina, restrictions on group gatherings have affected community based support and food programs. Health and Community Organizations have been working to support our community. For instance, Four Directions Community Health Centre, in partnership with other community programs, is providing bagged lunches for distribution in the community once a week. Four Directions has also continued to provide health education and supports to the community through social media platforms online, including literacy, recovery support, prenatal, stress management and parenting.

Treating Your Mental Health Online
Online psychological therapy is offered online in Saskatchewan and is designed to allow better access to mental health care. This is particularly important as individuals work hard to navigate working from home, children out of school and the quite-natural anxiety that stems from 24/7 news about the global COVID-19 pandemic. With the growing need for distance-services, we’ve increased our capacity and are on target to work with more than 625 people this year.

The SHA’s Online Therapy Team (OTT) works in partnership with the University of Regina’s Online Therapy User Unit (OTU) and is funded by the Ministry of Health. We treat clients from across the province using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy focused on coping with anxiety and depression. In short – this program offers effective therapy, in the comfort of your own home. It’s easy for providers and clients to work together regardless of where clients live or what their schedules may be like. It’s private, and it’s free.

The Future is in Your Hands
Continued discipline to follow measures and guidelines in place remains key in our offensive strategy with the public our health system’s critical teammate.
It is extremely important that while Saskatchewan is reporting fewer new cases of COVID-19, that we all remain vigilant and continue to follow public health orders and physically distance yourself from everyone who lives outside of your home. If you are out in the community to get essential things, maintain six feet (2 metres) of distance while you are out, and practice proper handwashing upon coming back home.

Residents need to remain vigilant and self-isolate at the first sign of symptoms. If you have symptoms of COVID-19, please self-isolate immediately and contact your family physician, nurse practitioner or call HealthLine 811 for advice on staying home and avoiding household contacts. If symptoms persist or worsen over the next 48 hours, you’ll likely be referred for testing.

**STRENGTHENING OUR DEFENSE**

The SHA is working on adjustments to its COVID-19 defensive strategy (for example, the acute care surge capacity plan) that was communicated publicly on April 8, 2020. It is expected that there will be more to share publicly on these adjustments next week. All adjustments will be based on the SHA’s planning philosophy of aiming for the best and preparing for the worst.

**Planned Capacity**

**Community Primary Health Care**

Even with the slowdown of non-urgent and non-essential services, some health care needs continue within the community.

- Home Care services continue to be provided to clients who wish to remain independent in their own homes.
- Maintaining immunization schedules to the best of our ability for our population of infants and young children is considered priority work.

All Primary Health Care Clients are pre-screened prior to being seen in a clinic or home setting to reduce the potential for transmission. Screening provides staff guidance as to how to safely provide care and this may include the utilization of PPE or cancellation/postponement of service. Telephone and virtual care delivery is supported but opportunity to care for people face to face is recommended as assessments suggest.