

Daycares, preschools to close after Friday in response to coronavirus, Manitoba premier says ^[1]

Provinces recommends no gatherings of more than 50 people, down from 250

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EXCERPTS

Licensed daycare centres and preschools will close at the end of the week in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Manitoba public health officials announced Tuesday as the province announced additional measures aimed at slowing the spread of the viral disease.

Licensed daycare centres and preschools will close on Friday, although some may stay open for health-care and other essential workers, Premier Brian Pallister announced at a Tuesday morning press conference.

Parents who are front-line health-care workers or emergency services providers who can't find alternative child care are asked to call 204-945-0776 or 1-888-213-4754 (toll free).

Home-based daycares that serve no more than eight children will be allowed to remain open, he added. Parents without daycare options should start making other arrangements, he warned.

"Manitobans deserve certainty [and] peace of mind and these are things that are most certainly in short supply in unprecedented times that we are now in," Pallister said.

Public health officials also announced casinos will close at the end of the day Tuesday and recommended the cancellation of all gatherings of more than 50 people, down from a previous recommended limit of 250 people.

Manitoba stopped short of ordering bars to close, as Quebec has done, or placing formal limits on restaurant operations.

Chief provincial public health officer Dr. Brent Roussin said it is up to restaurants, bars, retailers and other businesses to govern themselves accordingly.

The province also recommended the immediate suspension of visits to long-term care facilities and nursing homes until further notice, except for compassionate or end-of-life cases.

Officials also announced Tuesday that an online screening tool for COVID-19 went online on Monday evening. This tool uses the same script as the Health Links telephone, which continues to be overloaded with calls.

On Monday, the average wait time on Health Links was one hour and 55 minutes. The line will be upgraded with interactive voice prompts in the coming days.

Blood in short supply

Pallister also announced the province has a blood shortage and encouraged Manitobans to donate. Surgeries could be cancelled if people do not respond to the call to donate, he said.

Some surgeries may be postponed regardless as the province deals with the pandemic, if they can safely be delayed for three months, officials said.

The premier urged all Manitobans to do their part to slow the spread of COVID-19 and help their fellow Manitobans during this difficult time.

"Donate blood. Help a senior shop. Shovel your neighbour's walk. Do something to make sure you're helping each other be kind to one another. Help one another," he said.

"Together we can overcome any adversity."

There are two new dedicated COVID-19 testing sites open, one in Flin Flon in the Channing Auditorium in the Flin Flon Community Hall, 2 North Ave., Flin Flon, and one in The Pas, in Guy Hall, 28 First St. W.

Both sites will be open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday to Friday.

The province is planning to set up an eighth COVID-19 screening centre in Steinbach, said chief provincial nursing officer Lanette Siragusa.

Seven new cases of COVID-19 in Manitoba were announced Tuesday afternoon, bringing the total of presumptive or confirmed cases in the province to 15.

Prior to Tuesday afternoon's announcement, the province had said all cases identified to that point were related to travel, and there is no evidence the virus is spreading in the community in Manitoba. The province said it is investigating whether the new cases were travel-related.

Dr. Brent Roussin, the province's top public health officer, again stressed that people must self-isolate for 14 days if they are returning home from international travel, and everyone should continue with social distancing measures.

"We are not helpless against this virus," he said.

"Our preparation, our education with credible information, and then these actions that we're outlining now, these social distancing actions, will reduce the impact of coronavirus in Manitoba."

Daycare director 'relieved'

MJ Farrow is relieved to hear her Stars of Promise daycare in northeast Winnipeg, where she is the director, can shut its doors.

Her board was planning an emergency meeting tonight to consider closing the facility. They were stressed about losing provincial funding if they shut down without government approval.

"I'm happy that they're closing because I know it's going to be a big relief for all the staff," she said. "It's just too bad that they didn't do it for today."

Scared for their safety, three of her staff asked to go home early this morning.

"We've had parents that have been [out of the country] and their children have come to the daycare," Farrow said. "Now they're self-isolating."

Restaurants respond to 50-person gathering limit

The recommendation to limit gatherings to fewer than 50 people has led to changes at some restaurants, many of which have already closed or are attempting to remain open by offering takeout service.

Bernstein's Deli on Corydon Avenue reduced its seating from 64 seats to 30 on Tuesday by removing tables from its seating area.

"You keep hearing stay two metres from others, so I just wanted to space the dining room out so we could accommodate that as much as possible so people might be comfortable to come eat here still," owner Aaron Bernstein said.

"It's just about not being like too tight in a space with too many strangers where there's too many unknown things that might occur and who knows if you're going to carry it and not feel any symptoms and you might get others sick."

As of Tuesday, Canada reported a total of 466 cases, both confirmed and presumptive (which means only initial testing has been done).

Ontario reported its first COVID-19-related death on Tuesday: a man in his 70s at Royal Victoria Hospital in Barrie, a city about 100 kilometres north of Toronto.

This brings Canada's COVID-19 death toll to five. Four COVID-19-related deaths have been recorded in British Columbia.

In Ontario, Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency Tuesday morning due to COVID-19. Ontario will order the closure of restaurants and bars, although they will still be allowed to do takeout and delivery, and prohibit gatherings of more than 50 people to prevent the spread of the virus.

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