

COVID-19: Alberta cancels all school classes, closes licensed daycares ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Alberta is cancelling all school classes and closing daycares to contain the spread of COVID-19 across the province, Premier Jason Kenney said Sunday.

The number of confirmed cases in Alberta has risen by 17 — three in Edmonton and 14 in Calgary, bringing the total to 56, Kenney said at an update with Alberta's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw.

The decision to cancel classes across the province indefinitely was made as a result of extensive consultation with school boards and concerning new cases, Hinshaw said.

"These decisions are not made lightly, and I know that they will have a tremendous impact on Albertans' lives, particularly parents, children and seniors. I know some Albertans will wonder if these restrictions were truly necessary. I want to stress that they are necessary," said Hinshaw.

Hinshaw heard that her advice to schools in fighting the spread of the virus, including by social distancing, would be extremely difficult for front-line workers to carry out, in part because of limited staffing and supplies.

"Now is the time for additional action," she said.

Maintenance and administration would continue, and staff will be expected in schools to plan potential alternatives, but all classes from kindergartens to universities will be cancelled. Some small day home child-care providers would be exempt because of their size, however.

Education Minister Adriana LaGrange said that the move is unprecedented in the province, but necessary to keep students and communities safe.

"Students are expected to stay home. We are all in this together and everyone agrees this is the right decision," said LaGrange.

All students will get final marks and progress from one grade to another and eligible Grade 12 students will still graduate, she said. Provincial assessment tests will be cancelled but essential diploma exams will continue.

"I know these are challenging times for everyone," said LaGrange, who said she would provide more details in the near future.

New cases 'concerning'

Until now all cases had been travel-related or from close contact with travellers.

Two people among the new cases are receiving hospital treatment and are in stable condition, while the remaining 15 cases are self-isolating alone.

"Health officials have taken swift action to isolate these individuals and any close contacts who might have been at risk, however, there are several concerning elements about these new cases," said Hinshaw.

Hinshaw said two of the new cases appear to have come from an unknown source and likely involved community transition — meaning they were spread inside the province, not from someone coming to the province from elsewhere.

This means that there are other cases in the community that Alberta Health Services have not identified, increasing the public health risk.

Alberta Health Services is still investigating, but seven of the new cases stem from a single gathering in Calgary, Hinshaw said.

Provincial response stepped up

More restrictions may be rolled out in coming days, but the premier said the government will ask the legislature to commit an additional \$500 million towards public health so that front-line professionals have what they need.

The provincial operations centre coordinating the government COVID-19 response has moved to level three of four possible levels of emergency preparedness, and increased staff and resources.

The premier said anyone returning to Alberta from abroad must self-isolate for 14 days.

Visitors to long-term care and continuing care facilities should be restricted to only essential visits, said Hinshaw.

And, synagogues, churches and mosques are no longer exempt from Hinshaw's Thursday recommendation that large public gatherings of 250 people or more should be cancelled.

Hinshaw urged religious leaders to find other ways to support communities without mass gatherings in places of worship.

Kenney said he would clarify support measures to keep businesses operating, including income support for workers, in the legislature tomorrow.

"Decisions and actions taken now will ensure that our economy recovers as quickly as possible after the health crisis ends. We will move fast and we will move first if necessary to stop the spread of this virus," said Kenney.

All non-essential travel plans should be cancelled. Kenney warned anyone travelling outside Canada now runs the risk of having difficulty returning home.

"There is no good reason to be travelling for leisure at this time," Kenney said, adding he would be raising concerns with the federal government about screening and informing travellers coming into the province that they need to self-isolate.

The province is stepping up advertising and outreach to help inform people coming into Alberta, including snowbirds who have spent the winter in American states.

Children who had recently returned from overseas with their parents went into schools "notwithstanding the very clear recommendation not to do that," said Kenney.

Alberta will not be closing courtrooms, but justice officials are closely monitoring and considering alternatives, Kenney said.

"Our institutions must continue to function," said Kenney.

A new online self-assessment tool was introduced Friday to help reduce pressure on Health Link 811, which has been inundated with calls. As of Saturday, the province had completed 7,069 tests and added drive-thru testing sites in Edmonton and Calgary.

The risk of contracting COVID-19 in Alberta is still low.

However, Hinshaw reiterated that if people feel ill, they should stay at home. "People should not rely on test results to do the right thing."

As of Saturday, the World Health Organization was reporting 153,517 cases had been confirmed globally, and that the virus had caused 5,735 deaths.

In Canada, there have been 304 confirmed cases and one death, according to the latest numbers from the federal government.

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