

Ontario expands free child care to front-line workers as it sees 3,443 new cases of COVID-19 ^[1]

Another 40 deaths reported as labs complete record 72,900 tests

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EXCERPTED

Ontario announced on Saturday an expansion and an extension of free emergency child care it is offering to front-line workers as the province logged another 3,443 new COVID-19 cases and 40 more deaths.

The program is being offered to a greater range of essential workers and will be extended until Jan. 25.

The announcement by Education Minister Stephen Lecce comes after thousands of students began to attend school remotely this week to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Earlier this week, the province announced that students in southern Ontario would not return to class on Monday as planned but would instead continue with remote learning until at least Jan. 25.

"We recognize as this elementary school closure is extended that more people, more front-line workers will need support," Lecce said during a news conference.

"That's why today we're announcing an extension of the emergency and free child care we're providing to our front-line workers," he added.

"The first phase of it existed for this week, but obviously, given the extension [of online learning] to the 25th, we think it's reasonable to extend that free service for another two weeks."

The decision to extend remote learning until Jan. 25 was driven by soaring case numbers, which have remained well over 3,000 per day for almost a week, as well as for two days the previous week.

Canada Post, RCMP staff among those added to list

Lecce revealed an expanded list of who is eligible for the free child care.

Workers now eligible for childcare include Canada Post employees, staff with the RCMP or Canada Border Services, court services staff, power workers and those providing services to unhoused people.

Lecce said child care will be available for education staff who are required to attend school in-person to teach students who cannot learn remotely.

Ontario residents working in victims services, providing frontline services with children's aid societies or intervenor services for the deaf and blind are also among those on the list.

The expanded list now includes:

- Front-line staff in Children's Aid Societies and residential services.
- Individuals working in developmental services, violence against women services, and antihuman trafficking.
- Individuals working in victims' services.
- Individuals engaged in interpreting or intervenor services for persons who are deaf or deafblind.
- Individuals working in a homeless shelter or providing services to homeless persons.
- Food safety inspectors and individuals working in the processing, manufacturing or distribution of food and beverages.
- Provincial court services personnel, including Indigenous court workers.
- OPS staff employed in Radiation Protection Services.
- RCMP officers and Canada Border Services agents.
- Canada Post workers.
- Workers in Pharma and medical device manufacturing and distribution.

- Power workers.
- Non-municipal water and wastewater workers.
- Education staff who are required to attend schools to provide in-person instruction and support to students with special education needs who cannot be accommodated through remote learning.
- Employees of a hotel or motel that is acting as an isolation centre, health care centre, vaccine clinic or housing essential workers.

Toronto NDP MPP Marit Stiles, the party's education critic, and Scarborough NDP MPP Doly Begum, the party's child care critic, released a joint statement on Saturday, saying they were expecting the education minister to take more action to safeguard students during the pandemic.

"It's desperately frustrating for parents that Stephen Lecce got in front of the cameras, and didn't announce a single measure to make schools safe to reopen," the statement reads.

"This government doesn't want to invest in schools, and that's putting our kids health and their education at risk."

The statement called for widespread asymptomatic testing in schools across the province, a cap on class sizes of 15 students, improvements to ventilation in schools and paid sick leave for all parents.

1,090 new cases reported in Toronto

The announcement comes as the province is reporting more than 3,000 new cases of COVID-19 for the sixth straight day.

Health Minister Christine Elliott said Ontario's network of laboratories completed a record 72,900 tests in the last 24 hours.

There are 61,228 COVID-19 tests still under investigation. In total, Ontario has processed more than 8.4 million tests since the pandemic began in January.

Locally, there are 1,070 new cases in Toronto, 548 in Peel Region, 303 in York Region, 282 in Windsor-Essex County and 179 in Ottawa.

Several other regions in Ontario reported COVID-19 cases numbers in the triple digits on Saturday. They include:

- Durham Region: 166.
- Niagara: 134.
- Waterloo 116.

(Note: All of the figures used in this story are found on the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 dashboard or in its Daily Epidemiologic Summary. The number of cases for any region may differ from what is reported by the local public health unit, because local units report figures at different times.)

Meanwhile, there are now 400 COVID-19 patients in intensive care units (ICUs) across the province, according to the latest data from Critical Care Services Ontario.

The province says 244 of the patients in ICUs are breathing with the help of ventilators.

The 40 deaths reported Saturday include 26 people who were long-term care home residents.

Ontario's death toll now stands at 4,922.

The health ministry reported a record 4,249 cases on Friday and 3,519 cases on Thursday. A total of 71,481 tests were reported Friday, which was also a record for the province.

As of Saturday, the province said 2,915 more coronavirus cases have been resolved, bringing the total number of recovered patients since the pandemic began up to 178,224.

Over 100,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine administered

Elliott said more than 100,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been administered to the province's most vulnerable and those who care for them.

"As we continue to vaccinate thousands of Ontarians every day, we urge everyone to follow public health advice to protect yourself and your community," she said on Saturday.

Premier warns further restrictions coming

On Friday Premier Doug Ford said further restrictions are coming for Ontario, as health officials described the pandemic as "scary."

The premier said new modelling coming early next week will paint a potentially dire scenario in the province.

"We're in a desperate situation, and when you see the modelling, you'll fall out of your chair," Ford said.

"There will be further measures, because this is getting out of control."

Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Ontario's associate chief medical officer of health, agreed with that assessment. "I think we do need to consider more serious measures, perhaps similar to what happened in the spring," she said.

"Today's numbers, to be frank, are scary."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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