



Forging Ahead:

The Yukon's Continuing Response to COVID-19



on our path forward



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Minister's Message



Yukoners have worked hard and sacrificed much over the past 17 months, so it is wonderful to be able to provide details about how we are moving towards recovery.

Through this global crisis, despite the discipline we have shown and the sacrifices we have made, the Yukon has seen illness in people of all ages. We have seen hospitalizations and we have seen recoveries. Sadly, we have seen deaths. But throughout all of this, Yukoners have remained strong and have done their part to protect themselves and others. I thank first responders, public health nurses, health care and community workers and

Yukon Communicable Disease Control staff for everything you have done to help keep Yukoners safe.

We have led the country in our response to the pandemic and we continue to lead the country in our vaccine rates. We did not rush to lift restrictions when many others did, only to have to roll them back time and again. Our steps were measured and well thought out. Our actions were praised by Chief Public Health Officer of Canada Dr. Teresa Tam who said the Yukon is leading the way.

And while there are those who are concerned that we are rushing things now, we are following science and I am confident that we are taking careful, measured steps to get us back on the road to recovery.

We will continue to monitor the COVID-19 situation here in the Yukon, in Canada and around the world. If we see a resurgence, if we feel that the health and safety of our citizens is being threatened, we will use all of the tools available to us, including the *Civil Emergency Measures Act* and the *Public Health and Safety Act*.

As we forge ahead we will continue to respond to the needs of Yukoners and will always put the health and safety of Yukoners first.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Tracy-Anne McPhee'.

Health and Social Services Minister Tracy-Anne McPhee



Acting Chief Medical Officer of Health's Message



We have travelled this road through the pandemic for many months. Our overall response in the Yukon has had much success and has attracted the attention and respect of our partners on a national level. With this said, we have had our fair share of tragedies. With a recent wave of COVID-19 predominantly amongst unvaccinated people, many Yukoners and families have been sadly touched by the worst outcomes of this virus. Throughout this time we have responded wisely and we will continue to do so.

As we take the next step along this road, we will move from pandemic management towards living with COVID-19 as one of many endemic diseases.

This document lays out the pillars of the next phase of our response with the overall goal of preventing severe outcomes and death from COVID-19 while supporting the health and wellbeing of Yukoners.

As we begin our transition from pandemic to endemic, the Yukon will continue to see additional cases, clusters and even outbreaks. Our tools are different than they were a year ago; our response will be more targeted and refined. Vaccination will continue to be key to our response. It will also be important to be prepared to respond should a resurgence occur.

It will be essential that we continue with a measured response to COVID-19. In doing so we will continue to strike the best balance of minimizing the threat of COVID-19 while maximizing the overall health and wellbeing of Yukoners.

I look forward to forging the road ahead with my fellow Yukoners.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Elliott". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Catherine Elliott MD
The Yukon's acting Chief Medical Officer of Health

Purpose

Forging Ahead: The Yukon's Continuing Response to COVID-19 guides the way forward as we adapt to living with COVID-19 risk. The Government of Yukon will continue to support Yukoners and manage the next steps following the lifting of the State of Emergency.

Goals

Goal 1: Protect our Vulnerable Populations

To ensure that our most vulnerable populations are protected.

Like many other public health threats, COVID-19 has unequal impacts on different segments of the population. Certain factors, such as age, underlying health conditions, lower socio-economic status, precarious or insecure housing, and being unvaccinated, make people more vulnerable to severe disease from COVID-19.

Seniors and Elders

Seniors and Elders are more vulnerable to the complications of COVID-19. The risk of severe disease or death increases with age and more so when someone has underlying health conditions. The needs of people living in care homes and in the community must continue to be met by prioritizing access to vaccines for seniors, Elders and their caregivers and by providing them with appropriate social and health supports.

Children

Children have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. While children are less likely to experience severe COVID-19 disease, they remain the only demographic not yet eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine and are more likely to become infected. The Government of Yukon is planning for a timely rollout of vaccination for children under 12 once Health Canada has approved vaccines and the National Advisory Committee on Immunization has issued their recommendations.

Women

Women have been differentially affected by this pandemic. They have experienced an increase in intimate partner violence and sexual violence. Women have lost their jobs in greater numbers due to the sectors they tend to work in and due to the burden of unpaid care, which is disproportionately carried by women. The Government of Yukon will continue to provide support to anyone experiencing violence and will look to programming to address the unequal burden in the workplace that has been one of the unintended consequences of the pandemic.

People with Health Conditions

Those living with chronic medical conditions are more vulnerable to COVID-19, especially those with respiratory-related issues and those who are immunocompromised. Vaccination remains the best form of protection for this group. If people are unable to get vaccinated, our system must continue to support their individual needs.

People in Precarious or Insecure Housing

Factors that lead to precarious or insecure housing also lead to difficulty in self-isolating successfully, challenges in accessing vaccinations, physical and mental health care in general and overall vulnerability. Our partnerships with First Nations governments, communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and service providers are key in supporting these people and meeting them where they are.

Effectiveness of Vaccines

The vast majority of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths in the Yukon have been in people who had not been vaccinated. New variants of concern continue to arise in Canada and epidemiology shows that these variants are much more transmissible and may be more likely to lead to severe health complications. To date, vaccination is effective against known variants of concern. Therefore, vaccination remains our best protection against all forms of COVID-19.

Goal 2: Enhance Yukoners' Wellbeing

To mitigate the risk of COVID-19 and at the same time bolster our collective wellbeing.

Yukoners' wellbeing includes social connection, physical and mental health and economic vitality.

Social Connection

Yukoners have sacrificed many social connections during the pandemic. Our aim is to balance measures that protect Yukoners from infection and severe disease with restoring social connections and helping people live their lives with the least amount of disruption.

Mental and Physical Health

The toll that COVID-19 can take on someone's overall health is difficult to predict. Measures such as reduced social contacts, changes in schools, limited travel and postponed celebrations, as well as the ongoing stress and continued uncertainty about and fear of the virus, have impacted both physical and mental health. Our focus is on maximizing the physical and mental health of Yukoners without jeopardizing access to health and social care for non-COVID-19 needs.

Economic Vitality

Throughout the pandemic we have sought to preserve economic vitality by monitoring and adapting our financial supports to meet Yukoners' changing needs – from immediate relief to investment. While the effects of the pandemic have impacted all sectors of the economy, the tourism, retail, accommodation and service sectors have faced exceptional challenges.

In March 2021, we released our Economic Resilience Plan, the Government of Yukon's framework for supporting long-term resilience, growth and prosperity across all sectors of the Yukon's economy. The plan coordinates over 40 programs and initiatives that demonstrate our commitment to supporting people and businesses impacted by COVID-19. Our goal is a recovered and relaunched economy that is responsive and adaptive, supporting Yukoners as they thrive and prosper and paying particular attention to the differential impacts the pandemic has had on women in the workforce.

The Six Pillars to Forge Ahead

The Government Yukon's ongoing response to COVID-19 focuses on:

- reducing the number of people in the territory who are susceptible to COVID-19 and its variants through vaccination;
- continuing to test to find the virus in our communities;
- maintaining capacity in our health and social services system to respond to outbreaks where they occur;
- providing supports to people who are the most vulnerable to severe disease; and
- using targeted measures that focus on the areas of highest risk.

Rising vaccination rates in Canada and low COVID-19 activity have substantially reduced the risk to the Yukon of imported cases, allowing us to refocus on vaccination and rapid testing as our most effective tools. The following six pillars will guide our ongoing response and help prepare us for future surges.



Pillar 1

First Nations and Community Partnerships

Close government-to-government relationships with First Nations and municipalities have been critical to the Yukon's response and mitigating the impacts of COVID-19. We will ensure ongoing collaboration and communication regarding our public health response, including helping with self-isolation, social supports, contact tracing and enforcement as needed. We have and will continue to ask our partners, "How can we help?"

Actions

- Working with partners, reflect on and evaluate the pandemic response and draw out lessons learned while preparing for future pandemics.
- Support the First Nations and Community Liaison as they continue to facilitate communication between the Government of Yukon, First Nations and municipal governments and community partners.
- Continue to have regular conversations and communication with the Chief Medical Officer of Health, First Nations and municipal governments and community leadership.
- Contact First Nations governments and municipalities as soon as possible when there are active COVID-19 cases in their communities.
- Seek advice from First Nations governments and communities on targeted measures and provide and coordinate resources as requested and as needed if there is an outbreak in a First Nation or community.
- Based on the Government of Yukon's Economic Resilience Plan, continue to engage with businesses, industry and workers in all sectors so that we can adjust our economic and social supports.



Pillar 2

Vaccination

Immunization is the foundation of the Yukon's ongoing response to COVID-19 and critical to our success as a territory. Vaccination provides the strongest barrier of protection against the COVID-19 virus. Despite the Yukon having one of the highest vaccination rates in the country, the territory's population remains susceptible to COVID-19 and the associated risk of straining public health and acute care systems.

A continued, strong vaccination program will reduce the risk of widespread community transmission and severe disease. This risk reduction may be achievable with a 90 to 95 per cent vaccine uptake in the Yukon's population.

The more people who get vaccinated, the safer the territory will be. A continued increase in vaccination opportunities will improve vaccine rates and strengthen the Yukon's protection against COVID-19.

Actions

- Work strategically with First Nations, non-governmental partners and municipalities to ensure vaccines are accessible and available for people wherever they are.
- Continue making vaccines available in Whitehorse and at community health centres in communities by appointment or by drop-in.
- Continue to monitor vaccine efficacy, availability and best practices as the pandemic evolves.
- Expand our vaccination program to ensure protection for children under 12 as soon as Health Canada approves COVID-19 vaccines for that population.
- Continue our public education efforts to raise awareness of the importance, efficacy and safety of vaccines and to support vaccine uptake.
- Continue to monitor developments in Canada and the world regarding the use of vaccines.



Pillar 3

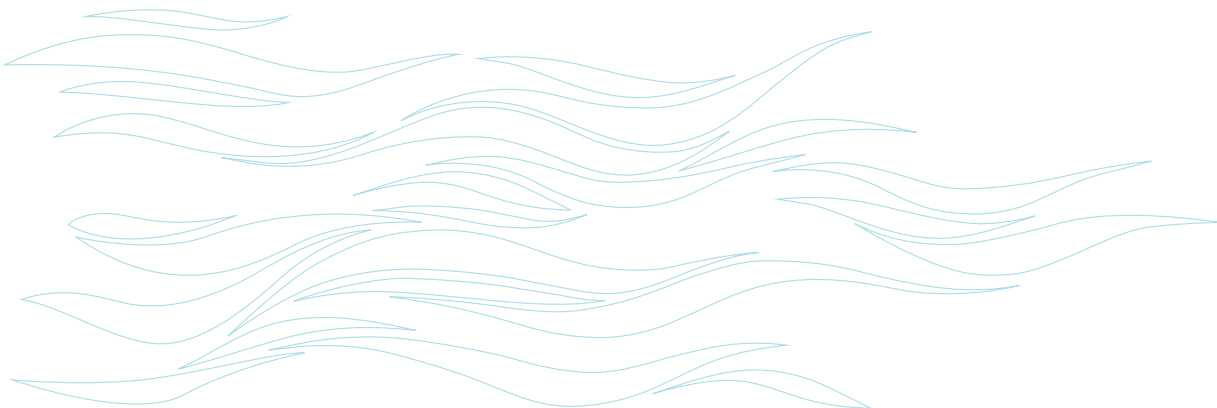
Testing and Surveillance

COVID-19 testing will continue to be a foundation of our approach as we forge ahead for the foreseeable future. We will strongly encourage Yukoners to seek testing as appropriate when they have symptoms, as guided by advice from public health officials and health-care providers.

Targeted and timely testing will ensure that the right tests are provided to the right people in the right place at the right time.

Actions

- Continue to make the gold standard British Columbia Centre for Disease Control PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test available for everyone in the Yukon based on clinical recommendations.
- Continue to make the GeneXpert rapid PCR test available in Whitehorse for specific situations where a rapid PCR test is key to informing clinical decisions.
- Increasingly rely on rapid point-of-care testing, with the goal of making such rapid testing technology available in a variety of settings, including communities, while monitoring the need and availability of devices as the pandemic evolves.
- In collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada and jurisdictional partners, continue to maintain strong epidemiological surveillance to detect new cases, outbreaks or variants as they emerge in the territory.





Pillar 4

Surge Capacity

With COVID-19 becoming more established as an endemic disease, it is likely that the Yukon will continue to experience positive cases and possibly outbreaks. Such outbreaks could result in surges of demand for public health and other health and social care.

Keeping the territory's health and social care system prepared to respond to future cases will ensure that Yukoners continue to receive high quality health care and social supports.

Public Health

Large outbreaks can place significant demand on the public health system to identify and isolate people who are infected and follow up with their contacts to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Key to our ongoing response to COVID-19 is flexible testing, contact tracing and communicable disease control to address future outbreaks, while maintaining other public health services offered at Yukon Communicable Disease Control (YCDC) and through community health centres.

Actions

- Maintain a team of trained professionals to support the Yukon's ongoing public health response to COVID-19 and continue to improve procedures to provide the flexibility needed during a surge.
- Coordinate with partner jurisdictions to provide virtual and in person support when there is an increase in demand for public health services.
- Continue to deploy rapid response teams as needed during future outbreaks.
- Improve communication, coordination and processes with First Nations governments and municipalities to better meet the needs of all Yukoners and communities.



Acute Care

As COVID-19 outbreaks occur, there may be significant demands on the Yukon's acute care system. Robust and efficient surge capacity means that acute care needs can be met without having to suspend other critical aspects of health care such as elective surgeries, diagnostic services and specialist visits.

Actions

- Continue to collaborate with the Yukon Hospital Corporation to ensure that acute care surge plans are up to date and ready to serve Yukoners who are experiencing severe illness from COVID-19 and require hospitalization.
- Continue to work with our partners in British Columbia and Alberta to ensure that Yukoners who require medical support out of the territory are able to be medevaced to specialized health care services in a timely manner.

Pillar 5

Social Supports for Vulnerable People

Yukoners who are vulnerable to COVID-19 need continued access to social supports at all times, including when they have been asked to self-isolate. We will continue to work with community partners to support vulnerable populations with services they know and trust.

Mental Wellness

Access to mental wellness supports is important to help Yukoners navigate the effects of the pandemic. Working to ensure full staffing of the Yukon's mental wellness hubs and ensuring that mental wellness services best match community needs will be an important part of our way forward.

Housing

People who do not have secure housing or who are precariously housed are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 and its effects. We will continue to work with partners to address housing insecurity to protect people who are the most vulnerable by providing them with housing and appropriate supports where needed.

Substance Use: Harm Reduction Approach

The summer 2021 COVID-19 wave in the Yukon has meant that many people who are precariously housed and who use substances have needed to self-isolate. This has caused a significant increase in the requirement for very specific and specialized services, many of which use a harm reduction approach. The ability to self-isolate successfully relies on effective collaboration between existing social supports within the Government of Yukon, the NGO community, municipalities, First Nations governments and local health care providers.





Victims of Intimate Partner Violence And Sexualized Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated some of the risk factors associated with intimate partner violence and sexualized violence such as isolation, lack of connection to trusted service providers and barriers to accessing services. We will continue to work with partners to communicate the availability of services, address known barriers to service access and offer flexible service delivery.

Actions

- Keep the self-isolation facility open until at least March 2022 and continue to provide personal items and food for people who are self-isolating.
- Continue to coordinate case management supports for vulnerable clients, including people in self-isolation, and provide access to professional supports and harm reduction supplies to people who need them.
- Continue to help support all Yukoners' mental wellness through services provided through Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services such as drop-in, rapid access and clinical counselling.
- Continue to work towards full staffing and retention of professional services at mental wellness hubs.
- Provide clients with withdrawal medication and monitoring, safe supplies of substances and care through the inter-professional team at the Referred Care Clinic.
- Continue to work towards a safe supply of opioids in the Yukon and implement a supervised consumption site to address the opioid crisis.
- Continue to offer flexible, low-barrier services to victims of intimate partner violence and sexualized violence.
- Focus programming on efforts to address the differential impacts the pandemic has had on women in the workforce.

Yukoners who are vulnerable to COVID-19 need continued access to social supports at all times, including when they have been asked to self-isolate.

Pillar 6

Public Health Measures

Though public health risk remains, the current vaccine uptake means that blanket public health measures are no longer the best method of protecting the territory's population. A more targeted approach is now required.

We will continue to encourage Yukoners to contribute to COVID-19 prevention in a number of ways in addition to getting vaccinated. This includes organizers of events and activities being aware of risks, and the adaptations they should make, and people who are considering participating in activities or events thinking about their own, personal risk factors, such as their vaccination status, their age, the presence of underlying health and medical conditions and the size and location of gatherings.

We will continue to urge Yukoners to observe essential practices including staying home when sick, washing our hands, being mindful of others' personal space, maintaining clean and well-ventilated spaces and self-isolating when we are asked to.

We will also continue with our existing mask use recommendations which will remain in place for some time, particularly during the flu season or when people are in high-risk settings.

As children under 12 are not yet eligible for vaccination, we will address school settings separately.

Actions

- Working with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, continue to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic situation using best practices and apply targeted measures as needed.
- Maintain targeted public health measures in certain settings such as schools, correctional facilities, health care facilities and the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter.
- Through the work of the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, update the guidance for public health measures for businesses and individuals to help keep themselves and their customers, clients and communities safe.
- Continue with education efforts to help Yukoners understand how the pandemic is evolving and to maintain the safety of communities.



Covid-19 in the Yukon to Date

Since COVID-19 first arrived in Canada in early 2020, public health experts across the country agreed there was a need to pay particular attention to the health of northerners, those living in remote settings with limited access to health care services, and Indigenous Peoples and communities.

In response, the Government of Yukon put in place a number of temporary public health measures to ensure Yukoners were well-protected until an effective vaccine was developed. These early measures, such as self-isolation, pausing in-person learning for Yukon students, limiting bars and restaurants to take-out and shutting down personal service establishments, were blunt and impacted everyone but in general served us well and helped keep case counts low throughout the first 14 months of the pandemic.

In summer 2020, when case activity stabilized across Canada, the Government of Yukon eased some restrictions to allow unrestricted travel between the Yukon and British Columbia and service-driven establishments to resume operations. Children returned to full-time, in-person classes with the exception of Whitehorse students in Grades 10 to 12 who followed a half-time in class, half-time remote schedule.

In November 2020, the Yukon experienced its first community-based outbreak with more than 40 cases. Through aggressive testing and strong contact tracing efforts, the outbreak was contained. Due to rising cases in Canada, the Government of Yukon initiated a mandatory mask order for indoor public places, while the travel bubble with British Columbia came to an end.

In the last days of 2020, the Yukon received its first vaccines. While the initial uptake was brisk, public health measures remained in place until a critical mass of people were vaccinated. In late May 2021, as our vaccination rates climbed closer to 75 per cent, the Government of Yukon announced that self-isolation would be lifted for fully vaccinated travellers.

As of June 1, 2021, one or more introductions of variant COVID-19 strains into the territory spread through a variety of informal gatherings, leading to several outbreaks and the Yukon's first real wave of COVID-19. Most infections were due to the Gamma variant, which spread rapidly throughout Whitehorse and into several rural communities.

The Yukon was among the first jurisdictions in North America to demonstrate the tremendous impact that COVID-19 can have on a significantly vaccinated population when highly transmissible variants of concern enter and enough unvaccinated people are infected, leading to widespread transmission and consequent illness and death, especially among the Yukon's most vulnerable populations.

The Yukon's public health system adapted quickly in response, implementing surge plans in critical areas such as Community Nursing and Yukon Communicable Disease Control. Rapid response testing teams were deployed to communities and the territory called for support from partners across Canada. Despite these actions, hospitalizations followed the surge in infections. While grappling with the Yukon's first COVID-19 wave, it became obvious that vaccinating 75 per cent of eligible adults (aged 18 and older) was not sufficient in itself to prevent severe impacts on vulnerable populations or prevent threats to both our acute and public health systems, though vaccination remained a powerful tool to reduce the threat of further transmission.

We will continue to see clusters and outbreaks as we move forward but we possess the tools required to successfully contain and manage ongoing cases.





Navigating the Future

Yukoners have endured many challenges throughout the pandemic. In response, non-profit organizations, businesses, health professionals, First Nations governments, all levels of other governments and the general public have come together to create and maintain an effective COVID-19 response.

The Yukon's latest challenge is to navigate the future steps that protect us against the threat of ongoing COVID-19 outbreaks and new variants while minimizing the health, social and economic impacts of restrictive, broad public health measures. These future measures will be more targeted, allowing flexible responses to the evolving threat of COVID-19, while moving the Yukon beyond blunt and widespread emergency measures that served the territory well in earlier stages of the pandemic.

COVID-19 is not over and may remain indefinitely. This six-pillar plan provides the framework for how the territory will make its way forward for the foreseeable future. In doing so, the Yukon will continue to strike the best balance possible of minimizing the threat of COVID-19 while maximizing the overall health and wellbeing of Yukoners.




Yukon