

COVID-19 Facebook live update: December 15, 2021

>> Good morning to you all.

I'm Renée Francoeur with cabinet communications and the moderator for today's COVID 19 update.

We are joined today by Premier Sandy Silver and the Acting Chief Medical Officer of Health, Doctor Catherine Elliott.

Closed captioning is provided by National Captioning Canada.

Thanks you to Mary Tiessen for providing our ASL interpretation and to Andre Bourcier for providing our French translation.

Following the remarks from our speakers, we will go to the media present in the room and then on the phone lines for a round of questions.

I'll call you by name and you'll each have two questions.

Before we begin, I'd like to verify that everyone can hear us?

If any of the reporters are having problems, please e mail ecoinfo@yukon.ca.

I will now hand it over to Premier Silver.

>> Thank you very much, Renée.

And good morning, everybody.

Thanks for joining us on the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Taa'an Kwächän Council.

I'm very happy to be here again with Doctor Elliott and Andre and Mary to share more about the situation we're in right now with COVID 19 in the territory.

Our vaccine rollout continues.

This week, the clinic in Whitehorse had focused on providing kids age five to 11 with their first shots.

As of Monday, more than 600 children have already received their first shot.

I know that it's a big relief parents and is likely an early Christmas gift for families.

The goal is to ensure that all children can receive their first dose before Christmas.

This is our priority for a safer holidays, and so I'm very grateful to all the staff who've

logged those long, long hours in the clinic to help support our goal.

Thank you to everybody who's working over there.

We truly appreciate your dedication.

Booster shots for those age 18 and older has also begun here in the Yukon and many appointments have been booked for the coming weeks.

There's also-- it's also great to see that as well.

More appointments will be coming available in coming the days and weeks. We're asking people to be patient there.

All eligible Yukoners who want a booster shot should be able to receive one before the end of January.

You are eligible for your booster if it has been six months since your second shot.

The vaccines, again, are proven, they're safe and effective.

They remain our best protection and I continue to urge all eligible Yukoners to get vaccinated, to get a booster as well once you're eligible.

Of course, you can find a clinic, information, and also book your shot online at yukon.ca/thisisourshot.

You can also call the COVID-19 info line for information on clinic dates and times, and that number is 1-877-374-0425.

Walk ins will be accommodated but remember, they are not necessarily guaranteed.

It has now been two weeks since the vaccine requirement for employees-- employment has come into effect.

Overall, it's been great to see how many people have attested to having their first dose of their COVID-19 vaccination.

As attestations continue to come in, I have some updated numbers to share.

As of yesterday, December 14th, 94.5 percent of employees have attested to having received their first dose.

Of those who have not yet attested, 1.5 percent are full time employees and that is 19 people.

Last week, Minister McPhee reported 107 individuals so we have seen an increase of an additional 17 individuals who have attested to their vaccine status.

Most of those who have not yet attested are casual or on call employees accounting for 3.2 percent of the workforce.

Those who have not yet attested can return to their jobs once they receive their first shot and attest to their vaccination status.

If your employee-- if your employment has been impacted by a vaccine requirement and if you are having trouble booking your vaccine online, you can call the number that I said earlier which again is 1 877 374 0425.

Tell the agent who answers that your employment is impacted and you were unable to book the vaccine online.

They will take your phone number and your name and the vaccine team will do everything in their power to find an appointment for you as soon as possible.

Thank you to everyone who has made their attestation and thank you to those who are looking to do so now.

And regardless of your vaccination status, I want to thank all of our public servants for their service.

The Government of Yukon provides a range of services to Yukoners throughout the territory, and it wouldn't be possible without the many dedicated individuals that show up each and every day to serve their fellow Yukoners.

So thank you very much for that.

December is obviously in full swing.

I hope everyone is enjoying the brisk air, the fresh snow, lots of sun dogs out lately.

That's for sure.

And hopefully, many other joys that winter does bring.

As we rush around and gather gifts and festive eats,

I want to take a moment to remind everybody again of how important it is to shop local.

This is especially true as we celebrate another season in the middle of a pandemic.

There's so many gem locations right across the territory.

In fact, Minister Pillai with Economic Development has been very busy on social media, highlighting some incredible businesses that have the perfect offerings for the season.

Check out his Facebook or Instagram for those fun videos as he tours around and finds the perfect stocking stuffer.

I know that local businesses have been challenged again and again by COVID-19.

We appreciate the dedication of Yukon businesses to adapt and to innovate as well to continue to provide goods and services to Yukoners.

So thank you, thank you for adjusting and keeping everyone safe and healthy.

It really matters and as the premier, I just want you to know that we are extremely grateful for all those efforts.

We are here for your business.

In the initial phase of the pandemic, our government took early action to provide the financial support necessary for business and employees.

We were one of the first governments in Canada to launch programs to support individual and businesses impacted by COVID-19, including paid sick leave programs and other business relief programs as well.

Throughout the pandemic, you know, we have continued to adapt as we navigate through the pandemic.

Since we declared the state of emergency last month, we launched two new funding programs to support local organizations and businesses impacted by the most recent public health measures.

The Yukon emergency relief program, for example, that's a relief program focused in on funding eligible for fixed costs for businesses and for nonrecoverable financial commitments for events that were cancelled or significantly altered because of the new orders under the civil emergency measures act.

The program has one stream for businesses and it also has another stream for nongovernment organizations, NGOs.

Additionally, the vaccine verification rebate is here to help those businesses and organizations that are required to check for proof of vaccination before allowing people to enter into their premises.

This vaccine verification rebate will provide up to 50 percent rebate up to a maximum rebate of \$500 to help offset the cost of buying a QR scanner or a mobile device where necessary.

Yukon businesses and organizations can contact the department of economic development to start an application for either program.

And the e mail address for them is “ecdev” and that's @yukon.ca, so ecdev@yukon.ca or also by phoning 867-456-3803.

It's extremely important to support local at all times, but definitely during the season here.

It's also important to take precautions as you gather with friends and family.

Our case count has stabilized, which is great news, but we still have active cases in the territory.

We continue to work closely with communities to respond to cases.

A rapid response team is being mobilized and will head up to Old Crow this week to help up there.

We have also been hearing a lot more information about the new variant, Omicron, which remains a concern.

We know this variant spreads very quickly and we need to take it very seriously.

It was the majority of the conversation with a first minister's call yesterday, with the premiers and the Prime Minister.

We must be careful during the holiday season to limit spread as much as possible, and of course we are continuing to have every effort to do so as we head into the holiday season.

Be safe, be kind and with that, I will hand it off to Doctor Elliott.

Thank you very much.

[Speaking Indigenous Language]

Thank you, Premier Silver.

Good morning, everyone.

Bonjour.

I will begin today with a case count overview.

As the premier pointed out, we continue to see steady case counts.

There have been a total of 1606 people infected with COVID, and 1550 people recovered since the beginning of the pandemic.

14 Yukoners have died from COVID 19 during this time.

As of this morning, we have 52 active cases in Yukon.

Of those, none are Omicron.

The dominant variant we encounter continues to be Delta.

The seven-day average of active cases is 67.6 compared with 63.6 the week before.

Over the past week, the average number of new cases a day is eight.

The percentage of our gold standard COVID 19 tests that are coming back positive is almost 12 percent.

Let's pause for a moment and consider these numbers.

These numbers show us that we're at a stable level of COVID 19 infection.

We continue to be in the middle of the Delta wave and we are able to manage the case counts we have every day in terms of our response.

We've all worked hard to get here and we are managing.

Now is really the time to keep this up because what we do now matters.

We need to wear masks, to take the time to wash our hands, to keep our group sizes small, stay physically distanced and socially connected.

To limit our travel to communities.

It is so important to stay home if you feel sick, even a little sick, even if you are vaccinated, even if you really think you need to go to work today.

Most importantly, please get all the vaccinations for which you are eligible.

Our continued efforts show how resilient we are here in Yukon.

It's not been easy.

At times, it's put pressure on our family, on your job, maybe on your relationship with friends.

This may have made you miss social, cultural, and sporting events.

Many have made the decision to change their travel plans once again.

And those who may not have wanted to initially, may not have wanted to at all, have gotten vaccinated to protect us all.

The hardship that you've endured and that we've all endured together as a community has been worth it.

It has drastically slowed the spread of COVID 19 in Yukon, it has kept people out of hospital, it has saved lives and it's protected all those people who are working so hard to respond to COVID-19.

The staff at YCDC, the nurses giving vaccinations, the healthcare workers and nurses, those throughout government and businesses who are reacting and responding to all the changes and programs that we've had throughout this pandemic.

Together, we've kept each other safe and we've kept our community together.

As the Acting Chief Medical Officer of Health of this wonderful, wonderful place called Yukon, I want to say one thing...

[Speaking Indigenous Language]

Merci, thank you.

Our efforts have stabilized the situation and shown us that we can manage the Delta variant by using our layers of protection and responding with circuit breaker when we need to.

We are not out of the woods.

We continue to see COVID 19 activity throughout the territory.

We're managing an outbreak at the Whitehorse correctional Centre where we've been able to contain the situation.

We continue to have exposure announcements at schools in several communities, and schools are working hard to keep students safe.

We have a cluster in Old Crow and as the premier said, we are sending a rapid response team to assist.

We are in a good position here in Yukon, thanks to your hard work. And there's still a high level of risk.

All this said, COVID 19 has thrown us a new challenge called Omicron.

In time here in Yukon, Omicron will become the dominant variant.

What we do now is about how much we can slow the time when Omicron is spreading in our community and how much we can abate or protect ourselves against any severe disease that Omicron could cause.

We have worked hard to get to this point and Omicron is pushing us to work harder.

Let's think one way to think of it is to think of the forest fire risk signs that we see along our highway here.

Currently, if we had such a risk sign, we would be in the orange.

The layers of protection with Delta have worked to slow the spread and stabilize the situation, and also to limit the number of people who have had to be hospitalized or who have passed away.

The new thing with Omicron is that it is so transmissible that in places where spread did not occur with Delta, when Omicron arrives, it will occur.

If we think about the layers of protection as turning what could be dry firewood into wet wood here in Yukon and limiting that spread, what Omicron does is it turns up the intensity and the heat so that the wet wood will burn.

Whereas with Delta, one person whose infectious in a restaurant might infect a few people at their table, with Omicron they could infect the entire table and people at the next table or in other parts of the restaurant.

In a gathering, rather than infecting a few people who spend a lot of time talking to a person who's infectious with Omicron, it will infect many more of those in the room. This is why we have to be so careful.

So that a single person cannot infect a large number of people.

Where just a small spark can ignite a blaze and that blaze can spread quickly-- we're seeing this in many parts of Canada-- it's only a matter of time before Omicron comes here to Yukon.

You can see that with Omicron, a single gathering, whether a party or gathering at work, where we've seen spread in social events and in work staff rooms and other places like this.

When Omicron is here, it will infect a lot more people who will then infect others who they are close to.

So when we think about this, what we want to do is turn down the heat to limit the spread and to protect ourselves from severe outcomes through vaccination.

One thing I've seen time and again throughout this pandemic is people think they're going to get infected by somebody who is foreign or from away or from a different

community or a different social group.

The fact is, we are most likely to infect those people we're close to, the people in our house, the people we see every day at work, the people we're most familiar with.

And that's really important to remember.

Think about the common cold.

It spreads in a very similar way.

Who would you infect with a cold?

Probably your family, if you have a cold.

You might infect your family or your work mates, your team, your arts group.

These are the close contacts.

These are the people we've chosen to be close to because it's so very important to have those social and physical contact.

And yet, these are also the people where we need to have caution and use our judgement to be cautious as much as we can.

All the time staying socially connected.

So, we really know what to do, and we can manage this, we can manage Delta by using our COVID sense, and we will be able to manage Omicron by using our COVID sense.

And so I'm asking you to use your COVID sense during the holiday season.

Carefully plan your activities outside your home.

Have your masks and your hand sanitizer ready.

Please, stay home if you are sick, even with a little snuffle, a bit of a chill in the morning, or a cough.

Please, stay home.

Let's be honest, though.

Holidays are traditionally a time to gather with family and friends so when you do attend a social or public event, just be extra vigilant.

Gatherings, events and celebrations are lowest risk when they're with people who you were already in close contact with, people from your household.

If you choose to gather with people from outside your household, choose lower risk activities and settings.

Get outside.

Keep voices low, so things like singing, you want to keep a bigger distance with that type of thing.

Wear your masks.

Meet with people who are fully vaccinated and use those layers, use that COVID sense, multiple public health measures to reduce the risk.

Regardless of your vaccination status, use all the public health measures and please stay home when you are sick.

[Laughter]

These measures are most effective when layered or combined together and this is why we have the measures in place right now.

When you're thinking about, what could be the risk of a certain situation, I'd like you to consider the following.

How many people you're gathering with are vaccinated?

And are there people who are vulnerable, for example, people who aren't vaccinated, people who are older, people with chronic disease.

If you are going to a setting, avoid it if it is crowded or if it is closed, or if the ventilation isn't good.

Follow the traffic flow, follow the business plans.

Wash your hands as you enter the local store to buy your local Christmas gifts which, we have so many incredible local businesses.

Wash your hands on your way in, wear your mask.

Keep your distance.

You may want to ask the host ahead of time about which public health measures will be in place.

You might want to get a sense of what proportion of people might be vaccinated.

These are questions that are really legitimate to ask right now.

People are going to have to make some difficult decisions about celebrations, and these decisions are personal and we need to show kindness and respect people's different decisions.

Of course at this time, Yukoners love to travel.

It may well be that you have a trip planned, whether locally or within Canada or internationally, or to one of the communities or from a community into a city to shop. Or meet with friends.

If it is, please use your COVID sense and travel wisely this holiday season.

Many of us are looking forward to seeing friends and family members that we've not seen for so long, which is wonderful and we can do it with caution.

None of us want to make others sick.

None of us want to bring Omicron back to Yukon, so here are some ways we can do this.

If you're planning to travel internationally or perhaps you are already overseas or in the US, please follow the federal travel advisories.

These are changing rapidly so check the Government of Canada travel website.

I would advise that you be prepared to be tested and/or to isolate when you return to Canada.

Check with the public health authority at your final destination for more information on travel restrictions and other public health restrictions and recommendations at that location.

Please be cautious wherever you're planning to travel and look to see what the COVID activity is in that place.

There may be additional provincial, territorial, and local public health measures at your final destination.

Consider how to use these precautions and how to use the protections you know.

If you are vulnerable to severe COVID, whether it's because you aren't fully vaccinated, because you are older, because you have chronic disease consider staying at home and keeping your contacts to a minimum. Or think about who can you be in physical contact with, a limited number of people, and who can you stay in contact with without being physically close.

There are many rumours about travel right now, so checking official websites is very important.

For the latest updates on the Government of Canada travel advisories, please visit travel.gc.ca/travelling/advisories.

I think it's clear that Omicron is a real present threat, and we are certain that it is more transmissible than any other variant.

It's already becoming dominant in many parts of the world and even in some parts of Canada.

It's spreading faster and wider than any strain of COVID-19 before.

Its health impacts and severity are not known.

Vaccines do not appear to work as well against the Omicron variant, based on what we know now.

I can't stress enough how cautious we all need to be in the face of the new strain.

I'm as eager as anyone else to be done with COVID 19, honestly.

And I also am eager to have this current state of emergency come to an end and to lift public health measures.

We need to do what we have to do right now and it really-- how well we do here in Yukon in terms of how many people get severe illness or pass away really has to do with how we conduct ourselves in the holiday season.

And that's why I keep saying this over and over again, because it's just so important and it really does make a difference.

Of course, one of the key-- in fact, the most important measure we have at this time is the vaccinations and it's really essential we continue to get everybody in Yukon vaccinated for their first shot, second shots, booster shots, etc.

So let's have a look at where our numbers are today.

91 percent of Yukoners age 18 and older have now had their first shot and 88 percent have had their second.

28 percent have received a booster shot.

For youth 12 to 17, 84 percent have had their first shot and 78 percent have had their second.

For children age five to 11, already 18 percent have received their first shots.

You can expect that number to increase quickly as we rollout a focus right now on pediatric vaccines.

The Whitehorse clinic is fully booked and we have teams visiting the communities, and we're going to vaccinate as many children as we can before the end of 2021.

We're giving out a lot of stickers to kids with sore arms these days, and some of them are not too happy to get vaccinated but many are very happy.

Let me tell you, I know many children who were upset that their parents did not get them the first vaccine appointment that was available in Yukon.

When I went to book appointments, they were full and my own child was upset that he wasn't gonna be the first.

Next month we will have more availability for booster shots, and will remain committed to making one available for every Yukoner who is eligible by the end of January.

The vaccination team is working so very hard and remember that this is the team that worked so very hard last Christmas season to get everybody as vaccinated as possible.

Please, when you see them, thank them and treat them with respect and kindness.

They've done such an incredible job.

So overall, our vaccination numbers are good but we're still seeing some gaps and we want to continue the efforts to get as many people vaccinated as possible.

If you haven't had your first or second shot, please do so soon.

Dr Silver spoke to how you can reach out if this is affecting your employment at this time.

[Laughter]

Did I say Doctor?

Wow.

Premier Silver has just said that.

I want to talk briefly about alternative vaccines.

There are some people who are interested in the Johnson and Johnson, or Janssen vaccine.

And if you were in that situation and if you have that rare situation where there is a medical need for this vaccine due to health concerns that have been identified and

recognized by your medical professional, you can call this number and explain your situation and someone will call you back to assist you.

The number to call if you're in that circumstance is 1 877 374 0425.

I'm speaking a lot today, it's because we've had a lot of questions and a lot of interest, and here's the next one that people are really interested in.

Testing.

Rapid antigen testings have been in the news a lot lately, and we've used these tests here in Yukon when they are appropriate.

So for example, we've used them when we need to screen a large population very quickly.

We've use them when we need to assess situations where we don't have access to the molecular testing and this is how we been using these rapid testings.

Antigen testings are not as sensitive as molecular tests.

In fact, I'm going to preempt this by saying there's different kinds of rapid tests.

There's your antigen test, which is what most people mean when they talk about rapid tests.

There is also a molecular rapid test, or what we have here in the territories, the ID NOW.

These are different types of tests with different characteristics.

I will talk here about antigen tests.

These have a role to play in certain circumstances and we've used them in the public health interest of Yukoners and they have served us well where they're needed.

The molecular tests, the rapid test takes a little bit longer and requires more skilled human resources and the gold standard test takes even longer to get results and requires a laboratory.

Most of our gold standard tests are sent to BC and we get the results in two to three days.

We are also able to offer results online, which makes everyone get their results quicker.

The other thing to know about the lab-based tests is we get better information.

We find out what variant that test is, that sample is and this is really important right

now as we track Omicron and we look at introduction here in territory.

I know there is a lot of public interest in rapid tests, and they have a certain role to play in certain circumstances and we are continually reviewing and looking at the appropriateness of this for general use.

And we're continually looking at how can we get results back to people faster to the interruption to their life from getting tested is limited.

For the time being, we have a strong system and it's because of-- for many reasons, one of which is the Omicron variant, it's really important to get these molecular tests.

If you have a rapid test result that's positive, please get a confirmatory test, both to be sure that it's a true positive and also so we can see what variant we have.

Remember that there is, in Whitehorse, two facilities for COVID-19.

The drive through testing is available at 91,628 Alaska Highway in the Centennial Motors wash bay across from the airport.

It's open every day from 8:30 to 5:30pm.

And appointments are not required.

Walk in testing is available at the SeaTac.

It's best to book an appointment by calling 867- 393 3083.

And the testing centre in Whitehorse is open every day from 8:30 to 6:00pm.

Outside of Whitehorse, testing is available at local health centres.

Please call them to arrange your testing.

In closing, I want to reiterate my thank you for all that you've done during this pandemic.

It has been a long haul.

And I want to also ask you to tighten your seatbelt for the challenges that lie ahead.

We have a new variant on the horizon, and it's spreading rapidly throughout Canada and around the worlds.

Our special holiday season will light up the coming weeks, and I'm asking you to use your COVID sense and creativity to practice safely as you visit family, friends and do your shopping, and enjoy the beauty here at home in Yukon or wherever you are this holiday season.

Take the break you need, do what you need to do to stay healthy for your mental health and your physical health.

Enjoy healthy food, get out for a walk and visit with people safely.

And most of all, don't lose faith.

We will get through this.

Take a deep breath.

Enjoy what you can, whether it's a fire at home, whether it's a sun dog, the sparkling snow, whether it's a visit or talk with someone you haven't been in touch with for a while, whether it's seeing a friend across the theatre or across the street and having a wave and a smile.

Perfect that over the mask eye-smile for all the strangers you meet.

Use your common sense to thank people.

Everybody is working hard at this time of year.

Many, many people worked hard and when people are short, recognize that it's a tough time and they need our support.

Please get all the vaccines that you are eligible for.

Travel wisely, make your decisions wisely.

And we've all done so well so far.

What we need to do now is to continue our efforts together to keep our community healthy and strong.

[Speaking Indigenous Language]

Thank you, merci.

Thank you, Doctor Elliott and thank you, Premier Silver.

We will now move on to the question and answer session with media.

A reminder to reporters, please identify which speaker you would like to answer your question before you start and please also remember to mute and unmute yourself.

We'll first go to the reporter in the room and start with Luke at CKRW.

>> Reporter: Thank you, this is a question probably best for Doctor Elliott.

I know there's a rapid response team that you said that's heading to Old Crow. I was wondering if you could update us on the Old Crow situation a little bit.

I know there was presumptive five positive cases in addition to three confirmed.

Do you have an updated case count in Old Crow and what the situation is like there now?

So, the case count yesterday--. I apologize, I haven't been in touch with the team on the case count this morning. The case count yesterday was four active cases and two recovered.

What I did get updated on this morning was around the spread because that's always what we're looking at.

As of this morning, the majority of cases were-- look like they were introduced from outside the community or close household contacts.

We are watching to see if there is spread in the community.

Old Crow community has really taken this bull by the horns and used all the tools in their toolbox including supporting people at home with food and necessities. Giving advice,

our Medical Health Officer will be on the radio answering questions and talking about the situation and we're really grateful for that partnership and will continue to work with them, and at this time we're not seeing transmission in the community, or community transmission.

We're seeing local situations. Thanks.

>> Reporter: And a question for Premier Silver.

At the First Ministers' Meeting yesterday, was there a lot of discussion about travel? I know there's a lot of questions people have about it. Was there a lot of discussion about travel and could that be, maybe, a day to day changing situation right now?

>> Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't hear something very soon from the Federal Government as far as some international measures.

Right across Canada, panning across, the Prime Minister, again, reiterated at that call the obligation and responsibility internally and domestically as within the provinces and territories and then to get a quick update as we went coast to coast to coast was very telling as well.

We see what's going on in Ontario and we see what's going on in Québec and again the rapid increase of Omicron is very interesting. Premier Ford talking about, you know, Omicron is, or will be, you know, the dominant strain very soon and just amazed at how quickly it's going through the system.

You know, talking with Dr Elliott as well, you know, the statistical analysis of the data from Africa, it's just too soon to tell, really, the long term effects or the strain on the local system here.

You know, you go to BC. Premier Horgan does not have a lot of active cases right now of Omicron so it seems to be trending more in Eastern Canada than it is in the west. This is, you know, the precautionary tale that we've been learning every time there's an outbreak is to watch these other jurisdictions and prepare for them.

In BC, they are focused in on--. Travel is hard internally anyway with the devastation through climate change to the road systems in general, but his comment last night was, "we are not foreseeing any changes to any travel restrictions at this time." But it was very telling to have a full conversation right across the nation of how folks are dealing with omicron and as we prepare here, locally, for the inevitability of strains coming up to the Yukon, I'm...really grateful for how well we've learned through each one of the outbreaks.

Forging forward, spoke about how we need to up tools very quickly.

Moving forward, as the pandemic turns to endemic, or turns to other variants, and I think that we've proven the ability to do that very, very quickly even though we do have a very tired group of dedicated Yukoners working on the front lines.

>> Reporter: Thank you.

>> Thanks.

>> Thank you.

We will now move to the phone lines and start with Haley at Yukon News.

>> Reporter: Thank you. I do have a couple questions about the use of rapid tests in the territory.

Obviously this is a discussion that's taking place in a lot of different jurisdictions, but, I'm wondering, Dr Elliot, if you could talk about why aren't tests being provided to the

general public? We're seeing that in some other provinces and territories and I am wondering what the current strategy here is in the Yukon with just providing rapid tests to the general public.

>> Thanks for the question.

When we talk about rapid tests, mostly what most people are talking about is rapid antigen tests.

This is important because in territory we also use, as is used in many jurisdictions across Canada, rapid molecular tests, or the ID NOW.

So I'm going to discuss rapid antigen tests which are the test kits that are being handed out in various parts of Canada at this time and are also being used here in Yukon.

With some...in certain circumstances. Rapid antigen tests give a quick result. They're fairly easy to use. They're not as easy as chewing a piece of gum, but they're fairly easy to use. And the result is pretty good. If you get a positive, it's probably a positive, and a few get a negative, it's probably a negative, but it's not 100%.

They have a role to play, especially when you have a lot of disease, or you have to test a lot of people quickly and you can't use the best tests.

People using tests at home is definitely the way of the future and we will get there. It has both benefits and risks.

The benefits are that people who are testing themselves, they want to do the right thing and they can test themselves and use their COVID sense based on the result. The downside is that it's really important that we understand the full gamut of how infection occurs and this is actually something that I've been wanting to say so I will take this opportunity.

A person gets infected on a certain day with COVID-19.

With the delta variant, a few days later, they become infectious, maybe one, maybe three. And a few more days later, they get symptoms. So there's a few days in there where they don't know they have anything and they are possibly spreading that infection, and that's why we say, "wear masks, keep your distance," et cetera because there is that period.

Once they have symptoms, they may get better in a few days. And during that period

where they have symptoms, that person is infectious. This is the key.

After a person gets better, they can still be infectious for up to ten days from when they started those symptoms for most people.

For people who get more severe disease et cetera it can be a longer period.

So if you get symptoms, and say you test positive, you stay home for a few days, you feel better, go back to work. Well, you've gone back to work infectious. And I think that's also part of what we're seeing, is that what's been seen across the country is sometimes people test, they test positive, they make their decisions, they're not always the decisions we would advise, but even more concerning is those people trying to do the best thing who don't realize they are infectious and go back about their activities and expose other people.

So this is why we offer public health counselling and advice, why we offer supports and that type of thing.

The other thing, as I mentioned, that's really important is that we track the variant right now and the only way to do that is through a lab based test. So we are looking at the role of rapid testing and the best place for it in our system here in Yukon.

We are using it currently and we're looking at the best ways to continue to use it or broaden that use over the coming weeks and months. So, more to come on this, but it is really important to know it's not completely straightforward.

And it's still important to get a lab based confirmatory test for those people who are using the rapid tests right now. Thanks.

>> Thank you. And your second question, Haley?

>> Reporter: Yeah, thank you.

So I understand that the federal government has provided, you know, both those antigen rapid tests and a number of the Abbott ID NOW molecular tests. I'm wondering if you could talk about any--. They've been used in a number of different circumstances. If some of those federal allotment have been provided to private businesses? I've heard, for example, that they might be being used, you know, with mining companies. Could you talk about that? Are these tests from the federal government being provided to private companies in the territory?

>> So we have--. When we look at the territory, from the beginning of the pandemic, we--. One of the things we do in public health is we try to fit-- we target our focus on those areas where we're most concerned about spread. So that includes places where a lot of people live together, in a congregate living setting, including our large mine settings. We have provided rapid antigen tests and rapid molecular tests to mine settings, and our mines have fantastic medical oversight and laboratory capacity to run these tests, these rapid tests, and we use them both when we have cases on mines and also for people coming in or exiting the mine to do some screening, depending on the specific scenario and risk scenario. We've also used rapid molecular tests in a number of other settings throughout the territory. So we've positioned technology and provided training in places like certain medical settings, the hospitals, some of the drug and alcohol treatment, residential settings. We've used them at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter.

And just-- There's a huge list of settings, honestly, that we've used these rapid molecular tests, which are much more accurate tests than the rapid antigen tests.

We're continuing to broaden our use of these and as we and the rest of the country learn more about the use, the appropriate use of these technologies, we will continue to do so. Thank you. >> Thank you. We'll now move to Amy with CBC.

[Beeping]

>> Reporter: Hi, thank you. This question is for Dr. Elliott. I was wondering if there's been any severe cases of COVID-19 in Old Crow so far?

>> So far, I'm not aware of any severe cases of COVID-19 in Old Crow during this current situation. Thanks.

>> Thank you. Amy, do you have a second question?

>> Reporter: Yes. My second question, what is the rapid response team going to be doing for Old Crow residents? Would that include rapid testing?

>> So our rapid response team will be providing testing support in Old Crow. This may include using rapid molecular testing, in a health center or community setting, and often also includes social supports, depending on the community's needs. The community

has expressed that, as we've seen time and again, in waves of COVID, that not only does COVID affect individuals, but it affects individuals who work in response. And so when there's areas of response that need support, this is-- these are the areas where the rapid response team will assist. Thanks. >> Thank you. We'll now move to Dirk with the Canadian Press.

>> Reporter: Hi. I'd like to ask the Premier, you said there's no Omicron cases in Yukon yet.

I'm wondering, do you feel it's inevitable that Omicron will arrive in the Yukon?

>> I will channel my inner CMOH. You know, it's not our first rodeo when it comes to outbreaks. And what I've heard every single time that there's epidemiology that's challenging the rest of Canada,

you know, sitting in these updates, it's we need to be prepared for the inevitable. So again, no different with Omicron versus Delta versus Gamma, we will be prepared for the inevitability. The team at the Chief Medical Officer of Health have done an impeccable job of tracing and understanding how Omicron has been internationally moving. And also, you know, updating me on the evidence and also statistically relevant information as we prepare for these things. But yeah, I mean, there's no magic formula to stopping in its tracks the spread of a variant, especially when our supply chain management is so connected to transportation to the lower provinces. You know, part of the conversation we're having with the Premiers and the Prime Minister about, you know, international measures, when we know that Omicron is already in Canada. Again, anything we can do to reduce the spread is really the focus right now.

>> Thank you. Dirk, do you have a second question?

>> Reporter: Sure. I'd like to ask Dr. Elliott, you outlined how well Yukon has done to the knock back the Delta-- the cases of the Delta variant. I'm wondering if you could go over again how, even though it hasn't arrived, how you plan to fight Omicron?

>> Sure. So with Delta right now, we're in the middle of a wave and things are stable, and that's why we continue to have measures in place, and we ask people to still be cautious and use their COVID sense.

Really, what we will see with Omicron is looking into a crystal ball. It's clear that this variant is more transmissible and is able to out-compete Delta very rapidly. What this means is that spread will occur more rapidly than it has with previous variants, and there'll be less room for error. As in other situations with variants, we will learn from what's going on across the country. And I, myself, had met with the chief medical officers of health across the country, probably seven-- six or seven times now since the first detection of Omicron in Canada.

And we continue to learn and we have rapid updates from these experiences. We have the tools in our toolbox. I think if you look at the forging ahead document and the pillars, these are the ways that we control a variant, whether it's Omicron, or, you know, we'll see Zeta one day. You know, every--. We're always going to get new variants.

The tools are immunization, testing, and case and contact tracing capacity.

They are our public health measures and the ability to surge, increase or decrease those measures, according to the risk activity.

There are-- Capacity to respond through acute care, so to respond to sick people. They include really good partnerships with communities and First Nations. As a testament, Old Crow our work in Old Crow right now is a testament to that. Our work with the government with Chief Tizya-Tramm, and throughout Old Crow to provide the supports they need in order to respond and offer our expertise in infectious disease. I think what's different about Omicron so far is it's touched us sooner than previous variants. You know, it was only recognized a variant of concern in late November and we've already had cases here. We've been able to contain those cases, but it's already here. It's spreading so quickly and becoming dominant so quickly. And so I think it's a matter of, we know what to do. You know, vaccinate, test, and trace.

Use our public health measures, make sure our acute care system is ready, have a capacity to surge, and each and every one of us to do the right thing and have that COVID sense in order to be...to keep ourselves as safe and healthy as possible. Listen, with a highly transmissible variant, you know, even if there's a 1% hospitalization rate, you can still have a significant impact on the healthcare system. And so not

transmitting is really, really important. Thanks a lot.

>> Thank you.

We'll now move to Tim at the White Horse Star.

>> Reporter: Yes, good morning. My first question is for the Premier. I had a phone call from someone yesterday who was posing an interesting question. He wanted to know as far as the vaccine mandates go, why it didn't cover school bus drivers. Can you confirm that's the case?

>> I'll have to take a look into it. Again, what we what we have said is, you know, contractors working with government officials are included the mandate. I don't have an answer or a response for you right now on that. I'll look into it.

>> Do you have a second question, Tim?

>> Reporter: Yes, and this is probably more for Dr Elliott. Once we start getting more Omicron cases, are those going to be sort of separated out in the case counts and reports? So we know how many Omicron cases there are and how fast it looks like it's spreading?

>> Thanks for the question. Yeah, certainly, we'll continue to look at Omicron in terms of the fraction of our cases, so what percentage. I really do want people to know that it takes a little bit of time to get variant information. And so using caution now is important. Because certainly across the country, we know that the spread occurs before you're really aware of the variant being present.

And if we have... You know, we'll use the same benchmarks that we always use. So a case, you know, how contained is it?

And then how much, you know, are we seeing transmission outside of the home in the community? And then are we seeing widespread community transmission? These are the types of benchmarks that we'll use. We'll certainly provide, you know, what we know about the fraction of the variant so that people can understand, you know, whether or not it's becoming dominant. I think what we've seen in the rest of Canada and around the world is that it becomes dominant quickly. And, and so that's--. You know, if I had a crystal ball, that's what I would be expecting, once we have transmission of Omicron. Thanks.

>> Thank you. We'll now move to John with CBC.

Hello, John at CBC?

We'll circle back. Anna at CBC.

>> Reporter: Hi. So my first question is to Dr Elliot. Last week, you mentioned that there were two Omicron cases in the territory. Can you clarify whether these people have recovered? Thank you. >> Our two Omicron cases have recovered. Thanks.

>> Do you have a second question, Anna?

>> Reporter: ..Elliot, so if Omicron is such a variant of concern, as you say in this press conference, then why not tell people to cancel their gatherings over the holidays?

Thank you.

>> So in terms of gathering advice we have now, we already have advice that people should gather in two households for social gatherings. We have advice for organized gatherings. We've limited many places to 50% occupancy, we have mandatory masking, vaccine passports, vaccine mandates, and these are the measures that we have in place at this time. People are urged to take caution, particularly those people who are at higher risk of severe disease. So that's people who are not fully vaccinated, those who are older, and those with chronic conditions. We also advise people to use their own COVID sense and do the things that they need to do to help themselves feel safe. This might include avoiding crowded indoor spaces, having gatherings outside rather than inside, and modifying who's at the event, looking at the vaccination status, as well as acknowledging, admitting, and knowing that transmission can occur from vaccinated people to other vaccinated people. Thank you.

>> Thank you. We'll now move to Vincent at Radio Canada.

[Reporter speaking French]

>> Interpreter: So Dr Elliot, you said that Omicron is a variant that is highly transmissible. Can you repeat in French why you're concerned about this variant and what people can do about it?

[Speaking French]

[Speaking French]

[Speaking French]

[Speaking French]

[Speaking French]

>> Thank you.

[Speaking French]

[Reporter speaking French]

>> Thank you. We'll now circle back one more time to John at CBC.

And did I miss any other reporters on the line?

Thank you. That now concludes our COVID-19 update. Our next COVID-19 update will be next week. Thank you again to our speakers and everyone who joined us on the line and live over Facebook. Stay safe and stay kind everyone.