



COVID-19 livestream transcript: Thursday, February 10, 2022

>> Renée: 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 the Minister of Economic Development Ranj Pillai, and the Acting Chief Medical Officer of Health Doctor Catherine Elliot. Thank you to Mary Thiessen for providing our ASL interpretation and André Bourcier for providing our French translation. Following the remarks from our speakers, we will go to the media 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 with our speakers, I would like to verify that everyone can hear us?

If any reporters are having problems, please email ecoinfo@yukon.ca.

I will now hand it over to Minister Pillai.

>> Minister Pillai: Great. Good morning. And thank you for joining us today on the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwächän Council. Unfortunately, I must start by acknowledging that two more Yukoners have died from COVID-19 in the last week, and of course, absolutely devastating news. And I want to send my condolences to the families of these individuals. Our thoughts are with their friends and loved ones during this difficult time.

I'm grateful to be here today with Doctor Elliott to provide an update on the COVID-19 in the territory. We continue to work our way through the latest wave of COVID-19 and the impacts of the omicron variant. Last week, Premier Silver laid out our plans for lifting public health measures in a slow and measured way.

We have been monitoring the situation and today I'm happy to share that we are in a position to continue with that plan. Starting tomorrow, a number of measures will be loosened. The limit on recreational team sports for those aged 19 and up as identified last week will increase to 25 people or 50% of venue capacity, whichever is less.

This limit also increases for arts and recreational activities such as concerts, performances, and pottery classes. I know many families were happy to see youth able to return to sports this last week, and arts and recreational activities as well in larger groups. And adults, again are just as excited to return as well.

The limit for indoor cultural gatherings will also be increased to 25 individuals or 50% capacity, venue capacity, whichever is less, with no restriction on the number of households. And indoor



personal gatherings will continue to be limited to a max of 10 people but will no longer be limited to two households.

Outdoor personal gatherings will also no longer be limited to three households, but will still be limited to 25 people, and indoor weddings and funerals will once again be allowed with a limit of 25 people or 50% venue capacity, whichever is less. And also, happy to add to this list today as well that bars and restaurants will be allowed to reintroduce bar and countertop service within those establishments and of course, just within the same spacing requirements as well. But this should be a significant change for our bars and restaurants.

Again, I want to thank all of the individuals and businesses and organizations that continue to follow health, public health measures to keep our territory safe. Without your diligence, we would not be in the position to continue lifting these measures. And again, I'm assuming we continue to trend in the right direction, we will be in a position to loosen additional measures next week, including increasing the limit on indoor organized events to 50% of venue capacity and removing the two-household limit for groups at bars and restaurants as well.

We recognize that the public health measures in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 have presented challenges for businesses in the territory, and especially in the hospitality sector.

I've heard from many restaurant owners about the pressures they are dealing with as we continue to navigate the Omicron wave. I want to thank them for their commitment to upholding these important health measures. I want to thank folks who have taken an opportunity to sit with me and tell me about their unique and particular challenges from one business to the next, that helps us understand on how to respond. I know it's not been easy. And I know that the current measures are affecting their bottom line. Today, I am excited to announce new supports that are being made available for these local businesses under a new stream of the Tourism Non-Accommodation Sector Supplement. So, under this new stream, bars and restaurants throughout the territory can receive up to \$20,000 per month to cover fixed and variable costs, including payroll and up to \$60,000 to the point of breakeven. And additionally, all bars and restaurants are eligible for a one-time sector supplement of \$10,000 regardless of profitability. Eligibility under the new this new stream will be retroactive to November 8, 2021 when we declared the state of emergency that is still in place.

To be eligible for this new stream, bars and restaurants must have been open and operating during the period for which they're claiming support. And bars and restaurants that have previously applied to the Yukon Emergency Relief Program will have their file reassessed and be moved over to this new funding stream.

In addition, the Yukon liquor corporation will provide bars and restaurants with a rebate on their liquor license fee for the next year. I'm pleased to provide these additional supports to reduce



their business costs for the 2022/2023 licensing year. Liquor licensees have received approximately \$3 million in support from the Yukon Liquor Corporation through a variety of initiatives since the pandemic began. And again, we're pleased to continue providing these supports. Beyond the acute pressures of the pandemic, in my conversations with local employers, I've also heard about the challenges around staffing.

Yukon continues to have the lowest unemployment rate in Canada, which is good news, but it does present challenges for employers. To help address this issue, I'm pleased to announce that our government is streamlining the Yukon Nominee Program.

For those who don't know the Yukon Nominee Program, it's the Yukon's main economic immigration program. When local staff cannot be found, the Nominee Program allows local employers to hire foreign nationals to fill their positions. Currently to ensure that no local staff available to fill the position-- that there is no local staff available to fill those positions the program requires employers to attempt to recruit locally and nationally, they have to advertise the position for four weeks and continue searching locally during that application process. We are now temporarily waiving these requirements to allow employers to act quickly and address their staffing needs. This change is effective immediately and will remain in place until June 30, 2022.

The Nominee Program has been again very successful in bringing new people to the territory and helping businesses meet their staffing needs. So, I look forward again to seeing new faces in our territory under the streamlined approach and supporting our businesses. I want to thank all businesses in the territory that have helped limit the spread of COVID-19 by following public health measures, and I also want to thank each individual for doing their part, by practising the safe six, masking up, getting vaccinated and limiting their contacts.

We all have a role to play in limiting the spread of COVID-19 so we can continue to move forward on the path to recovery. With that, I'll hand it off to Doctor Elliot. Thank you.

>> Doctor Elliot: Thank you Minister Pillai.

Good morning, everyone. Bonjour.

Before I begin today's COVID-19 update, I just wanted to take a moment to urge patience and understanding during another difficult and critical moment in this marathon of a pandemic.

Freedom of speech, healthy debate and plurality of beliefs and opinions are hallmarks of our democracy and things that I myself hold dear.

And this should never be at the cost of anybody's safety or sanctity.



It allows us to listen and hear all of the struggles that many people have had during this pandemic, and to understand that we're all doing our best in the ways that we can.

What we need now is kindness, the ability to listen, patience, and understanding to lead us through this crisis.

It will take the whole of our community and it will take us to be mature and strong.

There is a post-pandemic world that we are working toward and we have much healing to do on that pathway.

COVID-19 continues to impact all of us in many ways. And at this time, please do your best to be kind, patient and respectful of one another.

Here's what's happening around the territory with COVID today.

There are currently 99 active cases in the territory among those who have been tested and are in our system. There are many more who have tested at home or stayed home with their symptoms and are not in this count.

The number of new cases in the system today is 25. Remember that these numbers reflect people who require a PCR test and certainly do not reflect the entire case count in the territory.

Our most recent reports show that 125 hospitalizations due to COVID-19 have occurred during the pandemic. And as we reported on Monday, there have been another two deaths from COVID-19.

This brings the Yukon's total to 20 deaths since the pandemic began.

The average new daily case count over the past week is 19 and this is up from the previous-- sorry, in over the past three days is 18.

This seven day running percent positivity is 35%.

Over the course of the pandemic, there have been a total of 3,286 confirmed Yukon cases.

And 3,182 people have resolved or recovered from their acute COVID-19.

We have just declared a new outbreak at the Thomson Centre long-term care centre.

And outbreak measures have been extended in one house at Whistle Bend Place, so we have two active outbreaks at this time, and a total of six outbreaks during this wave.

I'll talk now about our public health measures.



As Minister Pillai just mentioned, we're continuing to gradually ease and lift the public health measures that we've had to use during this wave.

I am well aware that other jurisdictions are easing restrictions at a quicker pace.

Some are doing this due to being further along in the wave. Some are doing it due to other pressures and concerns.

The stakes are much higher with COVID-19. And we are finding ourselves at that part of the year where other places are seeing flowers or trees budding and, and we are in a lovely long winter that we have here in Yukon. As I was out this morning, I saw the most beautiful northern lights. And it reminded me how fortunate we are to be in such a beautiful place.

Just like the seasons, we're a little later in our wave.

And we're at a time where we must all dig deep and have perspective on this right now.

As the days get longer, many of us are itching to do more than we've been able. And I urge you all to know that it's important now to do more safely.

From the beginning of the pandemic, we've lagged behind our southern neighbours on the arrival of the virus and its successive waves. And this in part is why we have done overall well, in terms of the impact on our health and our economy during this pandemic. This is again, what's happening now, and our efforts are paying off.

As we look at the data now, it looks at this point as though we've reached the Omicron peak and we have early signals that we may be starting the decline.

I stress that these are early and there's much uncertainty at this time. And we need a bit more time to watch the trends to be certain.

There are some jurisdictions during Omicron that have had a very unique pattern around the peak with increases and decreases in that curve. And we may be one of those jurisdictions, time will tell.

In places with a small population like the Yukon, the trends fluctuate quickly, and the curves are much more jagged, and it makes it much harder to predict where we are and to predict the future.

And this is why we continue to watch the numbers as we work toward easing measures and helping everybody be as safe and healthy as possible.

I know there are lots of questions about the indicators that we look at. I'm going to take a moment now to just explain them.



I'd like to go over first of all the five main metrics that I'm looking at this time; there are many more and I couldn't give you a whole course in public health and preventive medicine this morning.

Here's the top five.

We look at immunity within the population. This is our rate of vaccination across various ages, stages and geography and specifics such as primary dose, secondary dose, booster, and those people who are not up to date on their vaccination, so have had that lagging period. They've had a period where their body is starting to forget a little bit how to use that vaccine knowledge and, and they they're due for their next vaccine.

We also look at hospitalizations and deaths, and these are measures of severity, how severe is this particular wave?

In this wave, I want to let you know that it has been severe; we've had a quarter of our COVID-19 deaths over the entire pandemic have occurred during this wave and we've had eight hospitalizations so far and we are at best halfway or a little over halfway through this wave.

We take into account outbreaks and clusters in vulnerable settings, such as in long-term care and in communities. We also look at case activity, which means the case counts and the percent positivity and also the distribution of those cases around the territory.

High percent positivity, which is the percent of all our tests that are done that are positive, a high percent positivity suggests high infection rates and high transmission in the community. We continue to have widespread community transmission of COVID-19 at this time.

As a rule of thumb, we ideally want our present positivity to be less than 5%. And currently, our seven-day average is 35%. This is very high.

We also look at absenteeism and staffing strain on the workforces and this has been a particularly important indicator in this wave because of the number of people who have illness that does not cause them to need hospital care but does take them out of the workforce and take their children out of schools and mean that they're not able to work.

In our healthcare sectors such as acute care and community response teams, community nursing, our YCDC team, and other response teams, we have had an impact to human resources during this wave. And I'd like everyone to remember that our public health service has been working hard. And I mean very hard for the over two years, and we are strained.

Now, that's by no means an exhaustive list. If you're listening closely, you'll hear that I didn't for example, mentioned school absenteeism, which of course we watch, and other things. But it gives you a sense of the top five that I'm looking at and in some of the priority indicators.



In closing, although we are seeing early, promising signs across the board, enough to begin a gradual easing of some of the restrictions, I think you can also see that we're in the middle right now, with some early sign that we might be on the decline.

I ask everyone to please act responsibly during this time, and with restraint I would not want to have to go backward with our restrictions.

We've had some hard-won ground gained at this point and we still have a ways to go.

We remain at a critical moment in the Omicron wave. And what we do now will determine what the coming months will look like for case counts and for restrictions. Let me give you an example. If you're due for a vaccine, maybe your booster, and perhaps you're young and healthy, you have a good immune system.

And it doesn't seem very urgent at this time.

If you get your booster now, in two weeks, you will have that immunity on the way down, you will be a third as likely to get infected as you were before you had your booster. Sorry, not before you had your booster, compared to someone who has not had a vaccine and somewhere around half as likely to get infected as you were before you got your booster.

You also, although it's unusual for a young healthy person to get severely ill, it means that your illness will be less severe overall. You'll have a shorter illness; you'll be off work for a shorter time and less affected.

You're also less likely to be hospitalized. The booster gives about an 80 to 90, 80 to 99% effectiveness against hospitalization.

And these are all factors to consider in terms of whether you get your booster now.

I think you can see why I would suggest you do get a booster if you're due for it.

Please, if you're sick, sick at all, please stay home and away from others. Let's limit the transmission at this time.

Please limit your contacts when you're out by following the rules right now.

These include the rules that Minister Pillai just outlined and limit your contacts when you're out. Please practise the safe six plus one.

It's very simple, it's very effective.

Please remember that the impacts of COVID-19 are not just physical, but of course, they've had incredible mental health impacts, and continue to strain us all in very different ways.



This is an important reason why I urge you to do your best to help us all get through this wave.

If you're struggling, please know that help is available.

There's an expanding network of mental health resources available on yukon.ca.

And we have the strength of family and community.

We have the beautiful nature here, and all the things that we do to keep us healthy and strong, here in Yukon, including now the ability to do more sports and recreational activities for adults.

You're not alone.

If you're struggling, please do reach out.

Thank you.

[Speaking Indigenous language]

Thank you, Doctor Elliott.

And thank you, Minister Pillai.

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 yourselves.

I understand someone is currently unmuted on the line, so if we could all just check, that would be helpful.

Thank you.

We'll go to the phone lines, and we will now start with John at CKRW.

Hi.

No questions.

Thank you.

Thank you, John.

We will now move to Tim at the Whitehorse Star.

Good morning.

My first question is for Minister Pillai.



It's a little off topic, but I was wondering if you could speak to the federal announcement last week of the \$4-million for self-isolation units, and why that hasn't been publicized.

And what's the idea behind that?

We're getting towards the end of the current wave, and here we are planning for more self-isolation units.

Isn't that going backwards?

Thanks, Tim.

You know what, I think first-- I've had a quick opportunity to see the announcement.

Look, I think we've housed about-- or provided isolation for over 1,000 people in the last two years.

And my sense was that it was identifying work that has been ongoing for the last number of years, and funds that we had received.

So, of course, we've worked to ensure that people, when they have the necessary needs to do that.

And so I think that, with that announcement, it also identified a majority of work that has been already undertaken, and work that accomplished our goals, which was to give people safe isolation.

So, that was my sense on it.

It wasn't so much about, you know, 4 million moving forward, but also identifying the work-- a lot of the work that has already been accomplished.

Tim, thanks for that question.

And I think it's so important to talk about where we're at in this wave.

We've come up a very steep slope, to get to where we're at.

We have very high case counts.

I know if you look at that curve, it's gone down.

Remember, on January 5, we reduced who's getting tested.

So, you need to look about two weeks after that.

We're still in the thick of it.



We're in the peak.

We're going like this.

It looks like we're coming down, but we certainly are not out of this wave.

We're halfway-- maybe a little over halfway through, and we have a ways to go.

I also want to mention that one of the goals is to have a good summer, to get our case counts low enough that we can enjoy the business, the tourism and all the pieces that we Yukoners enjoy, including travel for ourselves.

And as we get into the fall, we're likely to have another respiratory season with RSV, influenza and COVID-19.

And having capacity to do the things we know that work, including isolation, helping people isolate who can't isolate safely at home, is one of those things we need to have preparedness for as we go into the fall.

Thank you.

Thank you. Tim, do you have a second question?

I do, and this one would be for Doctor Elliott.

I appreciate that you went through some of the things that you look for, in terms of signposts for reducing restrictions, and you mentioned the 5% or less positivity rate in the test.

Are there any other benchmarks that you could share with the public is-- so they can track how close we are to having more restrictions loosened?

Yeah, thanks for that question.

I think it's really nice to see that everybody wants to track where we're at, and know where we're going.

And you know, I obviously love that as well, or I wouldn't have gone into this field.

I liken my work, and the way that I work with all of these indicators together, like that of a really honed hunter in the wilderness.

So, if I go and learn all of the skills of hunting, you know, the travelling through the wilderness, tracking, the use of firearms or other mechanisms to kill the animal, et cetera, I can gather all that knowledge.

However, it's really doing it when you learn.



If I had all that knowledge, and I went out with a very experienced hunter, we all know that that experienced hunter would be able to sense things in the air, how the tree smells, the weather, what happened last year.

Is it a good season or a bad season?

Are things up high or down low?

And be able to use all of that knowledge, gleaned from all sorts of sources, to enable that hunt to happen.

These are the things that I track.

I wouldn't say that any one has benchmarks.

It's not-- sure, as a rule of thumb, 5% positivity is-- is really great.

In terms of our case counts, now we have to look at them completely differently than we did before, because we're only tracking a small sector.

And to be honest, we're learning about what that's going to look like as we come down.

I would like to see no outbreaks in vulnerable settings, no outbreaks in long-term care.

Those are very concerning.

We have very vulnerable people in those settings.

No outbreaks in communities, no outbreaks in corrections, or on our mine sites, or in our acute care system.

That is a benchmark that I look for.

I'd like to see no staffing strain, no absenteeism due to COVID that's straining the system, either in healthcare or in our school system, in our businesses, et cetera.

And I would like to see everybody up to date with their vaccines.

Everybody.

Because that means that COVID can't transmit as easily, and that fewer people will end up -- in fact, with that level of protection, I'd be surprised to see many people at all in hospital, except those who are extremely old, and have multiple comorbidities, or multiple chronic diseases.

Those are the things I would like to see. And as we-- and the other thing is -- that has to be balanced with the strain that this puts on our mental health, on our way of being in the world, et cetera.



So, we have to constantly balance these two things in making these decisions.

My recommendations to government are based largely on communicable disease, and those factors I've outlined.

However, they do take into account the strain.

And government looks at the other factors, the other ways that society is being impacted, and we use these things in the decision-making.

And that's really how we work together throughout this wave.

We're making a really huge effort to make as much data available online for people, as possible.

We put some some more of our indicators online this week.

And we're going to continue to build on that, as well.

So that's really how we look at the pictures, a few of the benchmarks, things I'd like to see.

And, you know, I don't need all of those to come out to say we're out of the woods, but all of those are the things that we're watching.

Thank you.

We'll now move to Haley at Yukon News.

Thank you.

[Clearing throat]

Excuse me.

My first question would be for Dr Catherine Elliott.

You know, we have had four deaths this past week from COVID-19, and I realize the importance of respecting privacy of those families.

But I'm wondering if you could share a little information on whether those deaths align with hospitalizations, whether people died at home or in hospital.

I know privacy's important, but that is information that government's released in previous incidents.

Thank you, Haley.

We've had five deaths so far in the Omicron wave.



We have seen deaths both at home and in hospital.

And some of our deaths have been among people in long-term care.

One of the concerning things is when I think everybody should know this, and this is something that isn't particularly from our data, but it's true across Canada and around the world, and over our 20 deaths.

When a person continues to be sick, and not improving, is particularly after five to seven days of infection.

This is the time to seek assessment with your healthcare provider.

And assessment is also possible through the testing centre in Whitehorse, or at your community health centre.

That's a sign that further assessment is needed.

Our deaths here in territory do reflect the risk factors that we continually outline.

In terms of age, a number of our deaths have been amongst people over 65 in this wave.

And also vaccination status, the majority of our deaths have been among people who are not vaccinated, and certainly not fully vaccinated.

So, those are the things that are happening here in the territory, and they definitely reflect the data elsewhere.

Thank you for asking, Haley.

Thank you.

Haley, do you have a second question?

Thank you.

Yeah, my second question would be for Minister Pillai.

You announced, you know, a whole kind of suite of new options for business owners there.

I was curious if you could expand a little bit on that?

The one time supplement of 100,000, regardless of breakeven.

I know, it's been a tough year for a lot of businesses, but that's certainly, like, a flexible and generous option.

What influenced the choice to offer that, regardless of breakeven?



What are you hoping businesses will be able to accomplish if they access those funds?

Use those funds for?

Sure.

Thanks, Haley.

First, just to clarify, it's a \$10,000 one time, not \$100,000.

The total-- the maximum of funds available in this program, that we're identifying today, is \$60,000 over the period of time.

First, you know, what we're looking at is, with these programs, we're really trying to ensure that we fill gaps that might exist, based on what we've seen from the federal government and programs that we've already delivered to Yukoners.

So, we are in a position where, you know, unlike probably most jurisdictions in this country, where you've seen business under a tremendous amount of pressure, especially the hospitality industry, where businesses have been closing, we actually had businesses, as well, a number of businesses open in the middle of COVID.

Which, you know, I commend those folks for their courage and commitment to our community.

But within that, because they've only been open for a short period of time, there was a bit of gap in their ability to leverage funds from the federal government.

So, what we've done now is we've got the fixed costs that are identified that we can cover, but we also have variable costs that are there, as well.

Such things, as well such as payroll.

So, you know, I've sat down with business owners.

These are the things, over the last couple of weeks, that I've heard would be helpful.

We've continued, of course, to monitor what was happening here in the Yukon, and what recommendations were coming from Doctor Elliott.

And with that, looking where we should step in.

The \$10,000 one-time supplement, I mean, that's really about entrepreneurs that have been under a tremendous amount of stress.

In some cases, not being able to pull salary from their own business, because they're just trying to make sure that their costs are covered.



And this gives them a bit of an opportunity to leverage that.

So, they might just be at breakeven, but as many owners, they're always going to put their businesses and their staff ahead of themselves.

And so, this is recognizing that, and of course, giving them the opportunity to take, potentially, even salary on their own.

With that being said, I think you know, our hope at Economic Development and Tourism And Culture is that this not only gets folks through this, but in some cases, gives them a bit of a tailwind as we go into the spring.

You know, we're hoping that things will continue to trend the way they are, that we'll continue to be meeting with you on a weekly basis, and being able to provide more flexibility.

If Yukoners stay focused and look after each other, that's where we should get to.

So, with that being said, I think you'd have a hard time finding a program for restaurants and bars anywhere else in the country that is at this level of support and flexibility.

So, I challenge media to take a look, but I think we're really stepping up here for folks.

The other thing I would just add, as well Haley, is if you know, we had a bit of an opportunity to share this with you today, but if individuals need a bit more information, or need to navigate this, we've been working with TIA, Tourism Industry Association, for over the last two years very closely around the pandemic.

So, we have funded navigators that work on behalf of TIA to support both the tourism sector and the hospitality sector.

And so, if there's folks listening today, and they want to be able to get a bit more support and help to navigate through the multitude of programs that are available from the federal government, or our programs, or what we launched today, please feel free to send an email to info@tiayukon.com.

Thank you.

We'll now move to Chris at CBC.

Hi, thank you.

It's a question for Doctor Elliott.

In your memo to healthcare workers, that was published in late January, it says that Yukon has seen higher rates of RSV in the population.



I'm wondering if you can tell us, like, from what to what, like, how many RSV cases are we seeing, and why is this happening?

Thank you.

Yes, thanks, Chris.

So, RSV is a viral respiratory illness, otherwise known as respiratory syncytial virus.

It's a virus that we test for using the same type of test, the NP swab and the PCR test.

And we have a unique program in Yukon, where all of our test samples that go to BC CDC are samples, and many of those are tested for RSV and flu, as well as COVID-19.

So, what this means, first of all, is that we have a magnifying glass on our population when it comes to RSV.

Nonetheless, we have certainly seen an increase in RSV this year.

And RSV is something where very young children can have severe illness.

And so, it's another disease where we prevent transmission in order to protect those who are most vulnerable.

And we have two children, I just received the data this morning, who have received this medicine to help them stay healthy at this time.

So, it's important to know as well, that, you know, in the past two years, while we've had measures, and people have been washing their hands more, wearing masks more, keeping that distance, staying home when sick, we've seen less flu than we've ever seen before.

And with RSV, we've seen, as I said, more cases.

But you have to remember that we're also testing way more than we've ever tested before.

And the number of two children receiving medicine is not a huge increase.

I don't have the exact numbers over the past years, but it's not something we've been overly concerned about.

When we had a first case early on, we were watching this.

But now that we have two, and we're now into February, this is not as concerning as it was when we had our first client in November.

So, I think both of these things are important to remember.



A, is that we can control these viruses with the measures that we're taking.

And B, is that there are other viruses.

So if you are sick, and you have a negative-- well, if you have a negative antigen test, it may well be a false negative, it may not.

And if you have a negative PCR, and you're not infected with COVID-19, you may have RSV.

And that's another reason to stay home and prevent infection while you're feeling sick.

So that's the situation with RSV.

And this also is the proof in the pudding that we can control respiratory viruses, as we use all these measures.

Thank you.

Chris, do you have a second question?

Yeah, sure.

I guess for Doctor Elliott, but Minister Pillai can weigh in, if he wants.

We have seen some countries, Denmark being one, that have basically thrown off all public health restrictions and have, perhaps predictably, seen a major increase in COVID hospitalizations, particularly among vulnerable groups.

So, I guess my question is, are you sure it's a good idea to ease restrictions now?

And how much of it has to do with the science behind whether it's safe, and how much of it has to do with the very loud protests against public health measures that we've been seeing across the country?

I think that was for you.

No, I think it's-- you can start.

Do you want me to start?

Sure, okay.

Denmark is a very interesting case.

I urge people to Google "Denmark Epi Curve", and you'll see that it goes up very steeply, was one of the first places to have large, widespread Omicron, due to a number of super spreading events prior to the holidays.



And if you watch again, you'll see the top of the curve, it looks like it's going down and then it continues to kind of do that zigzag.

So, it may be in part due to the changes in restrictions, or the lifting of restrictions, and that certainly is not what we're doing here, lifting all restrictions.

And it's a reason why I urge people, please do not stop heeding the restrictions. Remember these things, remember that we've been able to allow youth and child sport and now adult sport and recreation and arts events, because of where we're at. However, we need to still be cautious. If you're out and about, limit your indoor gatherings to 25 people or 50% of venue capacity, whichever is less. Keep your indoor personal gatherings to 10 people, and outdoor personal gatherings to 25. If you're sick, stay home. Don't spread this virus around or any virus. You know, you can have a wedding or a funeral indoors, and you need to follow the same guidance, the 25 people or 50% of venue capacity. I think, you know, some people have learned some hard lessons during this wave by contracting disease and getting sick and there are ways to prevent that. Use your COVID sense, use your safe six. It's a really a balancing act. And I don't envy the government in their ultimate decision making. I think it's a very challenging decision making. And at the same time, I really think each of us needs to take our own personal responsibility and use our own COVID sense when we take the activities that we do. Do those things that are necessary to keep you healthy to keep your mental health good, use the most safest means to do that. And you know, the measures are really the least restrictive means meaning the least stringent measures that we need at this time. And many people will choose to go above and beyond that. And that's wonderful. And I thank you. Thanks.

Sure. Thanks, Christine. Look, I think, you know, we've all gone through this process. It's been a long two years. And, you know, we'll continue to work hand in hand with with Doctor Elliot on on how we roll this out. I think for us, it's such a fine line, as the doctor touched on. We're going to continue to have a very careful paced, opening based on the advice that we're getting. For us, it's, you know, and some folks would think well, you know, we need to make sure that we open up and get things back to a place where business can operate. But I'm also with the responsibility of tourism Minister, I mean, the tourism sector has been the hardest hit sector in our economy. And those are the folks of course, today we're trying to make sure that a portion of that is supported properly. And with some new some new measures from us, but at the same time, we have to do this right. Because as we get into April, May, and June, we're really counting on seeing those visitors return. And we need to make sure that this territory is a safe place to come and visit. So we have to get this right, folks have gone through and pushed it to the very end here in the tourism sector. And so I'm just happy to see us take that calculated approach to it versus opening up. I think we're going to get a chance to see some of our other colleagues across the country that have had a different approach. And certainly we'll see how



that works out. But interim, I think we're gonna see the same measured approach do I thin. And I think that this has been very carefully done. I don't feel like it's, you know, we watched what happened in Denmark a couple of weeks ago, where you know, it was a Friday announcement that hey, Monday or Tuesday, everything's going to change. You're not gonna-- as you can tell, you're not going to see that from us. We're going to be-- it's going to be very calculated on how we do this. That's what's worked since February of 2020. We're going to continue-- you know, that's the approach by the Premier. And that's approach by our cabinet. And that's been approached by Minister McPhee and I, you know, that's how we'll do this because that's what's worked for us. That's what's kept people, for the most part, extremely safe. And that will be how we roll this out. But yeah, certainly we're going to be watching internationally and across this country nationally, to see how some of these other decisions that have been made, are are going to play out.

Thank you. We'll now move to Brianna at Canadian Press.

Great. Thanks so much. I'm just wondering if Doctor Elliott can briefly speak to the overlap between the pandemic and overdose crisis, how the two sort of impact one another and how you guys are quantifying this? Thanks.

Thanks, Brianna. We've had an unprecedented rate of overdoses associated with illicit drugs this year, but also last year, and it weighs very heavily upon myself and I know also upon the Minister of Health and the Premier. And this is also a time of year where we see some of the greatest mental health impacts due to the long dark winters and the challenges that we all have, managing that, even those of us who like to play outside in the snow, it can be a lot of darkness, that we've had to get to this point of the year. The two-- the interplay of the two is not entirely certain at this time. I would urge people not to make really strong causal associations, we know that they do co occur in time. We also know that increases also been seen in BC, our southern neighbour and not unlikely a source of illicit drugs for us as well. We also, my understanding is based on some preliminary information that the change in various borders have shifted the drug supply with perhaps more toxicity and cross contamination of the drug supply then prior and this may also be playing into it. I urge people to please do not use alone, if you want to use without anybody in the territory knowing, then use the phone number to phone so somebody's on the line. And if something happens to you, help will come to you. And to have your Naloxone with you and know that it may not be enough. So, also be prepared to seek medical attention if something occurs while you're using. Listen, it's been a hard-- it's been a very hard road for all of us during this pandemic. And we're all coping as best we can. And I think for people who use substances to cope, which many, many people do, many, in fact, a large portion of people in society do that. The more you can shift something else into your coping mechanisms, conversations, relationships, sports, nature, sitting by the fire, other things



that can help be that, provide that, you know, psychological PPE or that resilience, use those as well. And those are much safer ways to be at this time. Or we continue to work with many partners on the substance use crisis, including working with the minister in the government. I look forward to the mental health summit occurring next week I believe and this work will be work we'll continue to do as we move forward. Thank you.

Thank you. Well, do you have a second question, Brianna?

No, thank you.

Thank you. We'll now move to Claudiane, Radio Canada

[Speaking French].

So Dr Elliot, I know you don't want to go too much in depth in where we are on the wave with Omicron but if you could repeat in French where we are and what you see coming in the near future regarding this wave?

Thank you. Merci, Claudienne. [Speaking French]. Merci beaucoup.

Thank you. Claudienne, do you have another question?

[Speaking French].

So Dr Elliot, you mentioned that it's important for everybody to have their own opinion and to be able to voice it. Are you worried with what is going on right now with demonstration and all of that? Do you ever worry about where all of this is going to bring us?

Merçi pour la question, Claudiane. [Speaking French].

And Claudiane, if I may. I just wanted to just to add on that particular question that we--of course, as a government, and we're here today, slowly loosening our restrictions in a calculated way. And so I think that that for many is hard and frustrating and difficult to suspend. There is, you know, there's an opportunity to see some blue sky ahead, again, of course. And we completely support individuals going out and having that ability to protest and to have their thoughts shared. But I just want to touch on the fact please, I ask folks, I mean, look, in government, you're tasked with making these decisions, and certainly, you know, let us be the brunt of your frustration but what we've had is reports in Whitehorse, specifically, where we've had businesses that have followed the rules and orders and in turn have been threatened. And so I ask people, please, the business community has had enough challenges, and specifically in the hospitality industry. I think, you know, I just-- it hurts to see individuals having to reach out... so hurt on social media because of how they're being treated. So again, please, you know,



direct your frustration to folks in government. But let's support business not make it more difficult for them.

Thank you. That concludes our COVID-19 update for today. Our next COVID-19 update will be next week. Thank you again to our speakers, and thank you to all the media and everyone watching live over Facebook. Be kind and stay safe.