

COVID-19 Facebook live update: September 16, 2020

>> Pat: Good afternoon.

I'm Pat Living with the department of health and social services and moderator for the COVID-19 update for Wednesday, September 16.

We are joined by the honourable Tracy-Anne McPhee, Minister of education and justice, and Yukon's Chief Medical Officer of health Dr Brendan Hanley.

Our sign language interpretation is being provided by Mary Tiessen via Zoom and Andre Bourcier from the French language services directorate will translate any languages by French-speaking journalist.

Following speakers we will go to the phone line for questions from reporters.

We will call you my name and you will each have one question plus a second.

Before we begin, I like to verify that everyone can hear us.

If any reporters are having problems, please e-mail Alexis Miller.

Thank you.

Minister McPhee?

>> Thanks very much, that.

Thank you for everyone joining us today on the traditional territory or territory of the Taa'an Kwächän Council in the Kwanlin Dün First Nation.

I am really pleased to be here today with Dr Hanley.

It has been six months since the impact of COVID-19 began to be felt here in our territory.

The challenges presented by this pandemic have forced us all to change the way that we live our day-to-day lives and work together to keep our family, our friends, and our neighbours safe.

Our government's priority continues to be protecting our territory and supporting Yukoners who have been impacted by the pandemic.

We took swift action to put programs in place to support Yukoners, including paid sick leave for Yukon workers and self-employed people who were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Funding for local businesses that have suffered and needed relief, income support for our dedicated essential workers, and supports to help Yukoners pay rent.

These programs are still available for those in need and details can be found on Yukon.ca.

We have also taken steps to keep residents across our territory safe.

Last week, we extended the state of emergency in the Yukon for the second time.

This ensures we can continue to enforce measures that our government has introduced to protect Yukoners from the spread of COVID-19.

This includes mandatory self isolation for those entering our territory from outside of British Columbia and the other territories, and it also includes the requirement for those transiting through our territory who choose so within 24 hours and to stay on a designated travel route and not enter into our communities.

These are important measures and we take them very seriously.

In the past week, we have had six new charges laid under the civil emergency measures act.

These were charges for failure to self isolate as required upon entry into the territory.

There were three of those.

Two charges for failing to act in accordance with a signed declaration, and the other was for failure to remain on a designated route while transiting through the territory.

We know these measures are inconvenient for many, but they have been successful in preventing the spread of the virus.

We encourage everyone, and continue to do so, to do their part in preventing the spread of COVID-19 in our territory, including those who were visiting us from outside.

I would like to remind all Yukoners and visitors to be kind, patient, and respectful to one another.

If you have concerns, please contact our enforcement team at covid19enforcement@gov.yk.ca.

Or you can call, 1-877-374-0425.

It has now also been a month since students returned to Yukon's schools.

The last few weeks have been challenging, no doubt about that.

It has taken a tremendous amount of work to adapt and adjust to the new health and safety guidelines for schools, and it has not been easy for anyone.

I am very encouraged to see that with patience, kindness, and mutual support of one another, we are seeing staff, students, families, and school communities settle into new school routines.

This is a school year like no other, but we are pleased that the majority of our schools have been able to return to full-time, face-to-face learning and that all Yukon students are able to connect with their friends and their teachers every day.

Our teachers have done a tremendous job to adapt with enthusiasm and creativity to ensure that our students can enjoy fun and engaging learning opportunities.

It has been a challenge for education systems across the country, and in fact across the world, to navigate the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic because it continues to be a dynamic situation that changes day to day in week to week.

We're very fortunate here in the Yukon to be in a position where our students can return to the classroom.

It truly takes a community to raise and educate our children, and I want to thank everyone who is contributing to the successful start of this school year.

Thank you to the parents who are helping their kids get ready every day and encouraging them to adapt to new routines.

Thank you to the school staff who are keeping our learning spaces organized and sanitized and safe for our students to use and enjoy.

Thank you to the bus drivers who are helping get students to and from school safely each day.

Thank you to our students for their resilience, courage, and determination that are really leading the way.

Thank you for teachers who are finding innovative ways to support and educate our students.

More than ever, schools -- school staff are finding creative ways to assess and meet student needs and meet students in their learning where they are.

They are supporting students by providing more personalized, flexible learning opportunities that are inclusive of each student's different needs.

As we continue to navigate this pandemic, it is more important than ever to reflect and identify the barriers and opportunities that are before us to make sure that students are supported.

The auditor General's report in 2019 recommended that we review our inclusive and special education services, and supports for students.

This review began in February with a focus on the Department of Education's current practices, procedures, and legislated responsibilities.

Some initial meetings with school and administrative staff took place before the pandemic arrived, but broader engagement with students, families, educators, school communities and our education partners were planned for April in May of 2020 but had to be postponed.

As a result, we are extending this review into the 2020-2021 school year to provide more time and opportunity to safely connect and gather perspectives.

The priority of this review is to take the time and -- to hear and listen to the feedback of those who use and deliver these services and know the system best including students, families, educators, school councils, and education partners and Yukon first nations.

We are currently working together with the consultant who is leading this review, with Yukon first Nations, and our partners and education to reschedule these opportunities for this fall.

These opportunities include an online tool to help safely gather perspectives and experiences, and there will be focus groups of educators including learning assistant teachers, school counsellors, educational assistants, and others.

Connection with Yukon first Nations, school councils, and the advisory committee for Yukon education and other professionals who work with children and youth with diverse needs.

Today we are sharing an interim update on the work that has been completed by the consultant to date.

This interim update is being shared with families and with our education partners, and will be posted on Yukon.ca today.

While we have experienced delays due to COVID-19, we remain committed to reviewing our inclusive and special education services and learning more about how we can support the needs of all Yukon students.

We expect the final report by the end of March in 2021.

Again, if I can just take a moment to thank the students and the school staff and school bus drivers and families, and all of our communities for your patience and support in supporting students going back to school this year.

We all share the goal of ensuring that our students are supported on their learning journeys, and we know that we can achieve that goal by working together.

Thank you.

>> Thank you, Minister McPhee.

Dr Hanley?

>> Thank you, and thank you Minister McPhee.

Good afternoon.

Tomorrow, as a Minister McPhee says, Yukon students will have been back in school for four weeks.

And students and staff continue to adapt and settle in very well.

Every additional day that goes on well shows that our working premise that the best place for children to be during the school year is in school is being borne out.

I acknowledge the challenges of teaching and learning and an alternate environment, but we are all learning to adapt as we are learning and other aspects of life during this pandemic.

One of the most challenging areas we have all been grappling with, whether in our own family lives as parents and caregivers or as children or staff in schools has been in knowing what the right thing to do is when children are sick.

For many weeks I have been hearing about how we are going to sustain a school year when kids will need to be sent home for any sniffle.

We have parents wondering about what happens when they themselves need to be at work and are reluctant to take yet another day of sick leave or even if there is any sick leave left.

In addition, I know that advice given to different families may have been different, whether to stay home for 14 days, to wait until symptoms clear, or even to return to school with low-grade symptoms.

So we have taken on this problem to our team and I think we have settled on some advice for parents and staff that we expect will offer some relief and some clarity.

By the end of this week, all parents should have received a new, easy to follow chart that will assist them in determining what "sick" means for a school a child in this new normal of COVID-19.

To complement this chart, we have also developed guidance for healthcare providers should they be asked to advise and this guidance will be available on our website later this week as well.

As we all know so well, symptoms of COVID-19 can be variable and what people present within the range of severity can be anything from asymptomatic to critical.

But with months of global experience, we have also learned a few things about what is more common and what is more unusual.

For example,, in general people have milder symptoms.

They will usually have a fever and a dry cough, gastrointestinal lower stomach issues more common in children than adults over the course of the disease, but not all stomach issues are COVID and certainly nor is every call for a fever.

Ad and a few other symptoms like runny nose, headache, or just not feeling well, and these common symptoms become less and less specific for the COVID-19 virus.

Just as we have already seen over the last few weeks, we will be seeing viral activity throughout the season with illnesses such as common colds, influenza, and gastrointestinal infections.

However, we also know that children will often get viral and mild viral illnesses that resolve themselves within one or two days.

All of these other viral symptoms do make it harder to pick up which might be COVID.

Keeping a low threshold for testing is one of our key strategies for detecting otherwise unrecognized introduction of COVID into our territory.

So how do we balance that radar searching for COVID with a reasonable measure for children and families not to miss school unnecessarily?

The literature to date, along with data accumulated from some large jurisdictions, does indicate to us which symptoms are safer and which symptoms are higher risk for COVID.

Thus, we have created a new tool based on a stoplight approach.

But before I go into this I want to say a couple of things about testing.

First, testing is always available and encouraged for anyone with symptoms.

But at the same time, we know it may not be practical or even necessary for every person with a runny nose to drop what they are doing and get tested.

By the way, I do note that we just surpassed 3,000 people testing in the territory for an overall positivity rate of about 0.5 percent.

The second point about testing is about the ones you're several days into an illness, testing actually starts to become less useful.

On the one hand, there is no need to test at the first moment-- sorry, but is on the one hand.

That testing becomes less useful later on.

But on the other hand, there is no need to test out the first moment of illness.

Unless you or your child are sick enough to need medical attention, there is no need to get tested at 11:00 PM at night for example.

The test result will not come back any faster.

The ideal time for testing is in that first day or two of symptoms.

But back to handling your child with their symptoms.

The first step is to assess your child every morning before going to school.

And in the traffic light approach, and I will show a quick version of a poster that we developed with the red, yellow, and green lights, in the green situation if there are no symptoms at all, this is not surprisingly when you can send her child to school.

But this category also includes symptoms-- situations where symptoms maybe consistent with a previously diagnosed health condition and are not new or unusual symptoms.

So allergies are a common in good example of this.

What if your child has a runny nose or stuffed up nose, or headache, or sore throat, or maybe just not feeling well?

A yellow light category includes a list of these lower risk symptoms and in these cases, keep the child at home and observed for 24 hours.

If these symptoms resolve in 24 hours, children can return to school without having a COVID-19 test.

However, if symptoms last more than 24 hours, children must either be tested or stay home for ten days before returning to school.

These are situations where the fastest way to resolve the dilemma of what to do is to get your child tested.

The one exception is an isolated runny nose.

We know that this symptom alone is only very rarely associated with COVID and we all know how common this symptom is throughout the fall and winter months.

In the case of just runny nose that persists past 24 hours and when the child is otherwise well, these kids can go back to school or day care.

In the red light category, testing for COVID-19 is strongly recommended.

These symptoms include cough, fever or chills, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing, and loss of taste or smell.

Even though in our current context these are also common symptoms of upper respiratory infection of any cause, these are more predictive symptoms for COVID and therefore deserve a higher level of precaution.

This is a lot of information to taken just from my words, and we will have the information sheets distributed through the Department of Education as well as posting to the Yukon.ca website to make it easier for parents to read and understand.

Probably the most important things to take away today is that a persisting runny nose only after that first day of observation does not necessitate a child remain at home or out of daycare.

A second or more symptom needs to be present.

And if a child does need to stay home and chooses not to test, the length of stay has decreased from 14 days to 10 days.

This is another area where with this information, we hope to help keep illness out of the schools but also to keep children in schools as much as we can in the current context.

Even with kids with a runny nose, practising safe measures within the school context helps to prevent sharing on any virus, not just COVID.

To keep COVID illness manageable within the territory, I like to remind all league owners to provide the Safe Six not only here at home, but when travelling out of the territory.

The borders within Canada of course are not closed and only a few jurisdictions including ourselves are requiring self isolation when arriving from another province or territory.

Manitoba, the three northern territories, and the Atlantic provinces.

And in Yukon, we have done something different from anywhere else in the country.

We have removed a self quarantine requirement from another major's jurisdiction.

In our case, the third largest province in the country that we happen to border with.

We continue to watch BC and the rest of the country and analyse where we want to go from here in one.

But if we want to at least keep our bubble open with BC when self-isolation is not required upon return from travel there, we are asking that you supersize the Safe Six when travelling.

Again, we expected to see more illness around the world in the fall time, and we could in Canada be on the verge of a major second wave.

But at a minimum, we are seeing some significant increased activity resulting in a higher number of cases being diagnosed daily in many other jurisdictions.

BC has seen recent spikes of course, and while this increase is being attributed in part to large gatherings and individuals relaxing the public health measures, these numbers are continuing to increase.

So please remember, if you're travelling outside Yukon, to take your travel manners with you.

Remember the Safe Six wherever you go.

Wash your hands, stay two metres apart from others not in your bubble, don't gather in large groups, travel respectfully, stay home and away from others if sick.

It is important to know the rules of the jurisdiction you're travelling to in addition.

Many communities now require masks in any enclosed space such as a shopping mall or other venue.

Know the rules and respect them, and when you come back home, be extra careful and extra respectful of the Safe Six measures which protect all of us.

This way,-- the way we will likely see an outbreak or further cases and the territory will be introductions from Yukoners returning home.

We all recognize the efforts of all Yukoners to stay safe and to keep COVID-19 at bay, and we and you have all done an amazing job today.

I ask that you keep doing it and that the Safe Six continue to resonate even when they begin to wear you down.

These are what is going to keep us safe in the long run and they may help us keep influenza and other respiratory illnesses also at distance for this season at least.

Someone the other day was asking about the continued importance of social bubbles and groups and again, the key take-home there is let's keep our social circles small.

By knowing where you have been and who you have been with, that's the best way for us to be able to do contact tracing if someone does become sick with COVID.

That information is of paramount importance to YCDC and community nursing you're responsible for all contact tracing in the territory.

If you think about it and if you have time, make a list of where you have been and who you have interacted with over the last three days.

That number may surprise you.

Someone might have to talk to everyone of those individuals in complete a risk assessment or ask them to come for a test if you became ill, if it happened to be a COVID illness.

And it might have to be a lot more than three days.

We are a small community in our bubbles and groups will intersect.

But it is still important to keep that group that you're with most often small.

That is all for today.

Thank you, merci.

>> Pat: Thank you.

Just before we go to the phone lines, I want to check.

Are there any reporters we may have missed on the line?

>> Pat: I'm sorry?

>> Reporter: Haley, Yukon News.

I just joined the gala bit late.

>> Pat: Thanks, we will add you in.

>> Reporter:

>> Pat: We will -- we will begin with Maryne from L'Aurore boréale.

>> Reporter:

[Speaking French]

>> Interpreter: So Dr Hanley, as your team started thinking about Halloween and what rules are going to be in place for that moment?

[Speaking French]

>> I will just repeat in English.

Question about Halloween.

Yes, we are working on some guidance so I will come back to you with some guidance to support children and families to be able to celebrate Halloween, even if in the modified COVID context.

>> Pat: Thank you.

[Speaking French]

>> Reporter:

[Speaking French]

>> Pat: We will move now to the Canadian press.

It appears we have lost Brenna.

Claudiane, Radio-Canada?

>> Reporter:

[Speaking French]

>> Interpreter: Dr Hanley, could you please repeat in French the reasons why you came up with this system of three colours to describe the symptoms of children?

[Speaking French]

>> Pat: Thank you.

[Speaking French]

>> Reporter: For the Minister of education, with the inclusive and special education report, will there be a hire of more education assistants?

This has been a long time requests from parents and educators alike.

>> Thank you, Claudiane.

It may be that ultimately that is part of the response, but it would have been relatively easy to say, let's hire more educational assistants and continue with the same process that has been in place for a long time.

What we know about inclusive and special education is it is not likely working as well as we wanted to, so this is a real review of the experiences of families and students and educational experts, as well as educators to determine how we can do this better.

And ultimately, the information that we get through the review of inclusive and special education will guide us on how to improve those services and how to do better in the future.

Whether that means additional educational assistants as one part of that puzzle, but I am hoping we will have a new path forward and a way that we can respond in very meaningful way as to the issues of students and families by listening to them.

>> Pat: Thank you.

Tim, CKRW?

>> Reporter: Good afternoon.

You mentioned the BC bubble and people having to take the Safe Six when they practice in BC and then when they come back.

Can you may be just address mask use for those who have returned from BC?

I am hearing people should be wearing a mask for 14 days when they come back.

We actually had a white horse city councillor do that last week and just maybe expand on that point.

>> Thank you, for that question.

I would not object to anyone who chose to do that.

I also would say that it is not entirely necessary given that it is not a necessary or mandatory measure in BC nor is it in Yukon.

But if someone wants to take that extra step of being cautious around, you know, to show extra caution and be extra cautious, I certainly would support that decision.

And it is important of course that really the fundamental is the observance of the Safe Six and avoiding some of those higher risk-- or taking extra care maybe to avoid those higher risk social situations.

So just being very careful to observe distancing, comply with our guidance around indoor and upper gatherings.

It doesn't necessarily mean doing anything different, it just means crossing your teas and docketing your eyes with doing what we are already asking everyone.

There is a component to that, that we do have more strict requirements to people who are working in healthcare settings, including acute care facilities in long-term care.

That also affects some of the visitation policies, so that is where, for instance if a healthcare worker, a nurse, Doctor or other health

care worker is travelling with BC and reentering a healthcare facility, we are asking for PPE and mask use for those first two weeks.

That is where we are being extra cautious with protecting those facilities that are more susceptible to an outbreak.

>> Pat: Thank you.

Next question, Tim?

>> Reporter: Yes, thank you.

I think I asked to this a couple of months ago actually but just in regards to flu shots, is there any consideration of bringing them online earlier than the month of November?

And will we have enough supply?

>> Great question.

We're really getting close to influenza season and I think we are preparing for late October introduction.

And as always, starting with making the flu shots available for the people at higher risk.

We have ordered actually double our usual supply, so we are prepared for higher demand which we expect to see.

And we are preparing in Whitehorse, the facility at the convention centre for offerings mass immunization clinics in a COVID Safeway.

In fact, I will be going there after this conference to check in on how preparations are going.

Really looking forward to this influenza vaccine season.

We will also be in the mass clinics and health centres when the flu vaccine is going to be offered.

We're also going to be offering the pneumococcal vaccine for those who require it, that is usually adults with underlying medical conditions or over age 65 if they haven't already received it.

And the other aspect is, we are also going to be having pharmacists deliver vaccines as an added component, and added way for people to get the influenza vaccine.

More details to come on that in terms of dates and locations and all of that definitely soon.

In terms of start time, late October really is ideally positioned.

You could argue that if we go too early, if you look at when do we want to have the most durable immunity, you still want to position it at a time where you can expect to have durable immunity well into spring.

The science around that is not the exact, but it could theoretically mean that if we go too early, you may get waning immunity towards the end of the season.

I think probably the more important aspect is logistical.

That is that you want to be sure you have all of the vaccine in the territory ready to go at all the places where you're going to offer a vaccine.

You have your supply, your personnel, you have your sights booked.

Really being well prepared and well-positioned to offer vaccine effectively and efficiently, that is the more important goal than the actual start time.

I think the start time is really ideal for where-- for where we anticipate our season to be.

Of course we don't know exactly what the flu season is going to be like.

We have not yet had confirmed influenza within the territory, so I think the timing is probably going to be ideal.

>> Pat: Thank you.

Haley, Yukon News.

>> Reporter: Thank you.

I know there was a plan recently to obtain a couple new buses, school buses.

I'm wondering if there is an update on that.

>> I will take that question.

Thanks Haley.

There has been a request by the service provider of standard bus to obtain more buses.

One of the issues-- I don't think they have arrived yet, but we expect them to arrive.

What is also important to remember is that there have been some staffing challenges as well.

Even if we could order many more buses in Canada, which we can't, obviously there are resource issues but more importantly, a lot of jurisdictions are looking for new buses across the country.

And also looking for new staff.

So it is a good reminder that we are all adjusting and adapting to the ongoing pandemic challenges, and to do so with we help patients and mutual support.

It is also a good idea for me to encourage anyone who enjoys working with students and maybe currently working -- looking for work opportunities to contact standard bus and hopefully provide-- will go there is training provided but hopefully work with students going forward and round out some of the challenges we are having with providing the full service that we want for getting students to school safely.

>> Pat: Thank you.

Follow-up question, Haley?

>> Reporter: Thanks.

My other question was the six new charges.

I know identifying information can't be shared but I wanted to confirm that it was three separate individuals, and were two individuals charged September 15th travelling to Yukon together?

>> I don't know the answer to the second part of the question.

And I think of the six chargers, there were five individuals.

>> Pat: Thank you.

Laura, CBC?

Can you hear us?

She was having some difficulty getting on.

Okay...

Hearing that she is not there, we can follow up with her questions if she wants to reach out after.

I would like to thank everyone for their time today.

Our next COVID-19 update is Wednesday --

>> Reporter: Excuse me.

>> Pat: Sorry, or you there?

>> Reporter: Sorry, I'm on the line.

>> Pat: Go ahead, we thought we had lost you.

>> Reporter: Hi there, thank you.

I guess this question is for Minister McPhee.

There has been some concerns about the number of substitute teachers in the territory right now, especially with more teachers having to stay home if they have any symptoms.

The teachers union has said there have been days this year when there have been sick teachers but could only get two substitutes.

I am wondering how your government is dealing with this and if the department has hired anymore this year?

>> Thank you, that is a great question.

Of course teachers on-call are an incredibly important part, a valued and important part of our education system.

Laura, I think it may be new to our territory but every year, we recruit teachers on-call at the beginning of the school year and that number increases throughout the term of the school year right up until, probably the highest numbers near April, May, and June on any given school year.

This is no different.

Of course we need teachers on-call to fill in when staff are absent in we are continuing to recruit teachers on-call through our schools.

There's also online social media, local and federal job search websites, and posters in the community.

Please, if you're interested in being a teacher on-call, you should contact the Department of Education or respond to one of those locations.

I can also indicate that we anticipate the numbers also to increase over the school year when some students who perhaps have not returned to university but might be interested in providing some teaching experience or services to the Department of Education may find that suits their schedule and their education goals as well.

But teachers on-call have been recruited.

We are working, as you can imagine, day to day to make sure there are qualified teachers and qualified teachers on-call and every school and respond as we have in the past when there has been other absences.

We have not seen a marked increase, although it is day-to-day at every school, and the school administrations are working hard to make sure that teachers on-call are contacted quickly and can respond to the needs of the school.

>> Pat: Thank you.

Do you have a follow-up?

>> Reporter: Yes, to clarify, so have any more teachers on-call have been hired this year than normally would be?

>> Not necessarily more.

I am just looking for my note.

I understand that there are about the same amount as would be in any particular year.

We have individuals of course responding due to their personal lives and their own situations and in teachers on-call are, as I have said, a group that increases over the school year.

>> Pat: Thank you.

Again, I would like to thank everyone for your time today.

Our next COVID-19 update is Wednesday, September 23rd, at 2:00 PM.