

# Medical Officer of Health: Report to The Board of Health

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# Medical Officer of Health Update

## Seasonal Respiratory Viruses

The 2024-25 respiratory season had a slower start this year but is now beginning to ramp up. COVID-19 percent positivity has been climbing since mid-November and is close to 10%. Provincially, percent positivity for COVID-19 testing was projected to increase between January 5 and January 18, 2025. Locally, we continue to see COVID-19 outbreaks in hospitals, retirement homes, and long-term care homes. COVID-19 percent positivity remains lower than it was at the same time last year. As of January 13, 2025, there were 3 active COVID-19 outbreaks in high-risk settings.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) also had a slower start this season, followed by an increase among Ontarians under 65 years of age, peaking in early to mid-December. As of January 13, there were no local RSV outbreaks in high-risk settings. Provincially, RSV activity among adults under 65 is predicted to continue declining until January 18. Early indications suggest fewer RSV outbreaks this season, likely due to the introduction of the RSV vaccine for individuals over 65 in high-risk settings.

Influenza activity started later this season compared to the two previous years, but percent positivity provincially is now increasing. In Ontario, the predominant circulating strain is currently H1N1. Locally, there was 1 active influenza outbreak in a high-risk setting as of January 13, 2025.

## Strengthening Public Health

**Voluntary Mergers:** Four voluntary merger applications were submitted, involving nine public health units. According to a memo sent by the Chief Medical Officer of Health on December 2, the government is proposing to amend the Health Protection and Promotion Act (HPPA), pending cabinet approval, to allow the following voluntary mergers:

- Porcupine Health Unit and Timiskaming Health Unit to become the Northeastern Health Unit
- Brant County Health Unit and Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit to become the Grand Erie Health Unit
- Haliburton, Kawartha and Pine Ridge District Health Unit and Peterborough County-City Health Unit to become the Haliburton Kawartha Northumberland and Peterborough Health Unit
- Hastings and Prince Edward Counties Health Unit, Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox and Addington Health Unit and Leeds, Grenville & Lanark District Health Unit to become the South East Health Unit

**Ontario Public Health Standards Review:** Since public health units and other stakeholders provided feedback on the draft Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS) in June 2024, the Ministry of Health has provided a brief summary of the comments received. We have been advised that the proposed new OPHS will be released in the summer of 2025, with implementation scheduled for January 2, 2026.

**Public Health Funding Review:** A proposal regarding the future funding of Local Public Health Units has been submitted to the government but we are unaware of the content of this proposal. Delegations from the township of East Ferris and City of North Bay will be meeting with the Hon. Sylvia Jones, Ontario Minister of Health, to discuss this topic.

## North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit Reorganization

The following changes were made related to the reorganization effective January 13, 2025:

- The Executive Director (ED), Human Resources position has been eliminated, and the Human Resources function has been moved into the ED, Corporate Services Portfolio, under the Manager, Human Resources.
- A new ED, Organizational Effectiveness has been created and the position filled. This position reports to the Medical Officer of Health/Executive Officer.
- The Program Manager responsible for Communications, Planning and Evaluation, Surveillance, and Quality Assurance will now report to the ED, Organizational Effectiveness. This portfolio will be renamed.
- The newly created Manager, Indigenous Engagement and Development role will report to the ED, Organizational Effectiveness. This position has been filled and has a start date of May 5, 2025.
- The Healthy Schools and Healthy Living programs have been combined and will be renamed. The former Manager, Healthy Schools has been assigned to this expanded program, and the Manager, Healthy Schools position will be eliminated. The former Manager, Healthy Living was the successful candidate for the new ED, Organizational Effectiveness position.

The Organizational Chart has been updated on our [website](#) to reflect the above.

The following changes are planned for later in the year:

- The ED, Finance position will be eliminated when vacated due to retirement later this year, and a new Manager, Finance position will be created, reporting to the ED, Corporate Services.
- A new service will be created to build health promotion capacity across the organization without increasing the overall full-time equivalent (FTE) count. This service will fall within the Organizational Effectiveness portfolio.

# Programs and Services Updates

## Indigenous Engagement

The Health Unit is furthering its commitment to reconciliation and the [Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action](#) and actioning our [Strategic Plan](#) by taking steps to Indigenize our physical space as we aim to provide anti-racist, culturally safe practices and to establish trusting relationships with our Indigenous partners.

The renovations for the indoor smudging room at the Health Unit office in North Bay are now complete and operational, and the final stages are taking place to further prepare the room. Members of the Health Unit's Indigenous Wellness Circle are being consulted on the layout the room (including furniture and artwork). A procedure to further support the practice of smudging is currently being developed and will be finalized once the Manager of the Indigenous Engagement & Development is in place at the Health Unit.

## Corporate Services

### Communications

- The Sharps social media campaign, *Community safety. That's the point!*, reached approximately 80,088 accounts in North Bay, West Nipissing and Parry Sound, facilitated 10,993 digital engagements, and generated 80% of the traffic to the Sharps webpage during the campaign period (November 20 - December 1, 2024).
- Communications collaborated with the Communicable Disease Control (CDC) program and the Ontario Ministry of Health Communications team to disseminate messaging on respiratory season protection measures.
- Traditional and digital platforms were used to advertise the Health Unit's additional COVID-19 and influenza immunization opportunities in December 2024.
- More public awareness of Planet Youth Nipissing and the health and well-being of Nipissing District teens was promoted, with Communications securing media coverage across local print, television and radio outlets during the launch of the Planet Youth Nipissing's 2024 survey results.
- Communications is planning for 2025, focusing on:
  - Reviving the Health Unit's public Annual Report
  - Launching a new presence on Instagram
  - Supporting program initiatives such as [Our Healthbox](#) (Sexual Health) and The Basics Pilot Project (Healthy Families)
  - Continuing to support the mobilization of the 2024-2027 Strategic Plan

### Facilities Operations

#### North Bay

- The [Our Healthbox](#) shelter has been installed, with the vending machine to arrive in the new year.

- Annual painting of various office areas was completed to address wear and tear.
- Three new replacement vaccine fridges were installed and calibrated.
- Interior windows in the reception/lobby area were cleaned.
- Blinds were installed in the Oral Health staff and clinic area, as requested by OH&S.

### **Parry Sound**

- The permanent generator has been connected and commissioned.

### *Information Technology*

- Installed additional emergency paging speakers in Parry Sound rooms to increase coverage.
- Added 2 Ethernet switches in Parry Sound to accommodate additional capacity.
- Planned and ordered digital displays for the oral health operatory in Parry Sound.
- Transitioned the Quality Improvement Reporting process (QIR) from the Mindoka system to the Service Desk Software system.
- Installed Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) approved mice and keyboards in clinical areas.
- Performed a cybersecurity tabletop exercise to test our preparedness.

### *Planning and Evaluation*

#### **Population Health Assessment & Surveillance**

- Provided local oral health-related statistics to support an Oral Health Access Fund grant application.
- A summary report is being finalized all Health Unit driven investigations into poly- or perfluoroalkylated substances (PFAS) and the potential effects on kidney-related cancers. This includes a summary of results from Ontario Health who aided in an investigation into kidney cancer rates among North Bay residents using municipally supplied water.
- An internal dashboard is being finalized to display local data on opioid-related overdoses and substance related deaths for the Health Unit region. This dashboard will be used as a surveillance tool for monitoring rates of overdoses and/or deaths within the community along with the already publicly available [Online Overdose Early Warning System](#).
- Data from the latest Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH), Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) analyses will be transitioned to a centralized Child and Youth focused webpage. This includes data on mental health, physical activity, and substance use among students grades 7-12, facilitating ease of communication and access.

#### **Health Equity**

The internal Health Equity Hive Committee has launched a process to support staff to engage with the HIVE on non-urgent requests. The initiative aims to create a transparent, efficient, and consistent approach to health equity work, reducing internal silos and enhancing the organization's overall impact.

## Strategic Planning

In late November, a planning session was held with Priority and Strategy Leads to outline their roles in mobilizing the 2024-2027 [Strategic Plan](#). The session covered:

- The planning framework to develop their intended outcomes and associated work plans;
- Effective facilitation strategies to guide their Working Groups.

Knowledge gained through this planning session will inform strategy Working Group meetings scheduled for January and February 2025, during which one-year work plans will be developed to mobilize their respective strategies.

## Clinical Services

### *Communicable Disease Control*

#### **Candida auris**

Effective January 1, 2025, *Candida auris* (*C. auris*) is now a Disease of Public Health Significance in Ontario and is now reportable to local Medical Officers of Health under the Health Protection and Promotion Act, 1990. This designation aims to improve surveillance and enhance preparedness to detect and prevent cases and outbreaks.

*C. auris* is a fungal pathogen that is often multi-drug-resistant and highly transmissible. It can infect various body sites, including the bloodstream or wounds. It often spreads in healthcare settings and can cause invasive disease with high mortality rates. Persistent outbreaks in hospitals have been documented in other countries including the United States.

*C. auris* infections are challenging to treat, making it an emerging global health threat.

#### **Outbreak Activity**

From October 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024, the CDC program managed 26 outbreaks in long-term care homes, retirement homes, other high-risk congregate living settings and childcare settings.

Breakdown of outbreaks:

- 20 COVID-19 outbreaks
- 3 outbreaks caused by an unknown respiratory illness
- 1 outbreak caused by parainfluenza
- 2 outbreaks caused by an unknown enteric illness

#### **Influenza**

Since the beginning of the 2024-2025 season, a total of 5 cases of influenza have been reported

- 3 cases of influenza A
- 2 cases of influenza B

As of January 10, 2025, there is localized influenza activity in the district, including one influenza outbreak in a retirement home.

## **Invasive Group A Streptococcal Infections (iGAS) Update**

Group A *Streptococcus* (group A strep, *Streptococcus pyogenes*) can cause both non-invasive and invasive disease and may be present in asymptomatic carriers. Invasive group A streptococcal infections occur when the pathogen infects normally sterile sites, such as the blood, cerebrospinal fluid, joints, pleural or pericardial fluid.

Two of the most severe forms of invasive Group A Streptococcal (iGAS) include:

- Necrotizing fasciitis (flesh-eating disease)
- Streptococcal Toxic Shock Syndrome (STSS)

Rapid diagnosis, aggressive management, and early use of appropriate antibiotics are critical for these conditions.

The Health Unit continues to observe an increase in iGAS infections in 2024. In 2023, the Health Unit observed the highest number of cases in over twenty years (20 cases). Provincially, from October 1, 2024 to November 30, 2024 rates of confirmed iGAS cases were highest in Northwestern Health Unit, Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit, Renfrew County and District Health Unit and the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit. As of December 31, 2024, 35 confirmed cases have been reported, almost double the five-year average of 15.4 cases per year. Four cases reported in 2024 were confirmed to have emm type 1 with the M1UK subtype, which is an emerging hyper-virulent strain first identified in England and is associated with scarlet fever and iGAS disease.

## *Professional Practice*

Professional Practice has welcomed 30 students this semester, including Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) consolidation students, third-year BScN students in community placements, Bachelor of Education students, and Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) Dietetic interns. From January to May, these students will gain valuable public health experience while contributing to workforce capacity. The Registered Nurse (RN) prescribing pilot in the Sexual Health program officially started in early January and will continue for 12 to 18 months. This pilot is part of a significant scope of practice change for RNs that took place in late 2023. As one of the first Health Units to implement this changed scope of practice, the pilot aims to explore if the new scope can be effectively utilized within our public health settings. Early implementation steps are underway, and the evaluation framework is in place to assess the outcomes of the pilot.

## *Oral Health and Vision Screening*

In December 2024, Oral Health had the opportunity to submit a proposal to Health Canada's Oral Health Access Fund. This is a new 3-year funding stream that aims to reduce or remove non-financial barriers to accessing oral health services for targeted populations and complement the Canadian Dental Care Plan. Our proposal focuses on individuals who are homeless, underhoused or in transitional housing, and describes a 3-year project that aims to identify a sustainable community-supported alternative delivery model for accessing oral health care services in the



North Bay area. Successful applicants will receive notification by early Spring with funds flowing shortly thereafter. Relevant community partners (DNSSAB, LIPI, Canadore College, North Bay Indigenous Hub and Nipissing Wellness OHT) were notified of our proposal and expressed support with the intent to collaborate if funding is received.

### *Sexual Health*

The internal HIV urgent response group continues to plan and implement activities to address increased HIV rates in the Parry Sound area. Internal representation and external involvement from Indigenous partners and the AIDS Committee of North Bay and area have been involved in developing promotional materials to raise awareness about HIV in the Parry Sound area and encourage testing with a February 2025 launch date.

### *Harm Reduction/Needle Syringe Program*

The successful permanent Community Health Promotor candidate has officially started their position. This position will focus on enhanced harm reduction (EHR) initiatives, including naloxone and the Needle Syringe Program (NSP), and the up-and-coming [Our Healthbox](#) (OHB) vending machine to be located at our 345 Oak Street West location in North Bay. The OHB will offer low-barrier access to health products and community health and social service information. Individuals can anonymously access take-home HIV self-testing kits and other harm reduction supplies, including naloxone, as well as hygiene products (e.g., toothbrushes, soap, menstrual products), socks, and condoms. The anticipated installation date for the OHB is March 2025.

### *Vaccine Preventable Diseases*

#### **Seasonal Vaccines**

With Fall community COVID-19 and influenza (flu) campaigns winding down but demand persisting, the Health Unit opened Walk-in Fridays in the North Bay and Parry Sound offices throughout December to ensure everyone who wanted a vaccine had access. The pop-up clinics were well received with 200+ clients walking in at each clinic. In January 2025, vaccines will be available by appointment during our regular clinic hours in both North Bay and Parry Sound for anyone unable to get a vaccine at a local pharmacy or primary care provider.

#### **Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Prevention Program**

Uptake of RSV vaccination in Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes has been delayed due to several outbreaks across the district. Immunization rates are rising slowly as facilities recover from these outbreaks. The Health Unit, hospitals, and local primary care providers have continued to offer RSV vaccines to pregnant individuals, as well as a preventive treatment to infants, and high-risk children within our district.

## Secondary School Immunization Program

The month of December marked the beginning of our secondary school immunization clinics. This year, we introduced a trial electronic consent form whereby consent forms were mailed home to student/parents, with the option to complete the vaccine consent form using a QR code which brought them to an electronic consent form which once completed was electronically returned directly to the Health Unit. This new process aims to increase efficiency and improve consent return rates ultimately increasing vaccine uptake. The effectiveness of this new process will be evaluated once clinics have been completed.

## Community Services

### *Environmental Health*

2024 food premises inspection completion rates were positive, with 100% of seasonal and 99% of year-round high-risk premises completed. Likewise, 95% of personal service establishments were inspected in 2024.

In preparation for the spring a new Health Unit webpage has been created on [Cooling Towers](#) to support owners and operators of buildings with cooling towers with understanding the importance of maintenance to prevent Legionella disease. An inventory of cooling towers across the Health Unit district has been completed to support future investigations into Legionella disease cases.

### *Healthy Families*

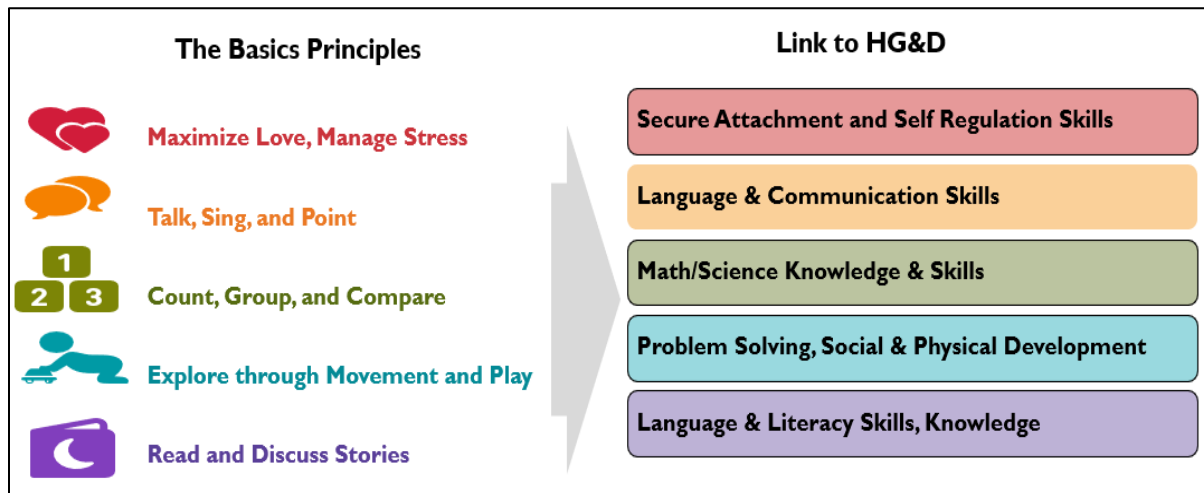
The Health Unit is facilitating the implementation of a new positive parenting initiative, called The Basics Nipissing – Parry Sound.



**The Basics Strategy** is comprehensive evidence-based Positive Parenting promotion initiative. The overall goal is that all infants, toddlers, and preschoolers achieve their fullest potential. Evidence shows that positive childhood experiences and nurturing interactions in the early years support brain development, parent-child relationships, early learning, resilience and have lasting implications for lifelong learning, well-being, and health.

**The Basics Movement** involves a cross-sector network of organizations committed to bolstering social determinants of cognitive, emotional, and relational health. The Health Unit will undertake the Backbone role for the *Basics Nipissing-Parry Sound*. This role involves planning and coordination of our community implementation of the Strategy; facilitating the flow of Basics resources/training to local Basics partners; monitoring, data collection, and evaluation processes.

Community saturation of key concepts is achieved through five science-based concepts of positive parent-child interactions and child development called the **Basics Principles**. The figure below lists the principles and their connection to Healthy Growth and Development (HG&D).



**Program Components:**

[The Basics Community Toolkit](#) is a repository of tools and resources designed to facilitate the dissemination of The Basics Principles with families across the Nipissing and Parry Sound districts. It includes a variety of materials, such as videos, activity guides, workshops, handouts, implementation guides, training, research and evaluation reports and more.

**The Local Community Basics Website** provides a range of information and resources for parents and community partners.

**Basics Insights Texting Program** is a digital parenting initiative designed to provide parents with developmentally appropriate guidance for supporting their children’s development and promoting parent-child interactions. The program provides weekly text messages containing developmentally appropriate guidance for teaching young children and establishing nurturing parent-child interactions.

*Healthy Living*

The Parry Sound Drug Strategy (PSDS) hosted events for National Addictions Awareness Week (NAAW) between November 25 and 28, 2024, at the Parry Sound Friendship Centre. As co-chair of the PSDS, a Community Health Promoter from Healthy Living, was involved with planning of the weeklong events and attended each day. Consistent with the theme for NAAW, *Forging Connections*, the events aimed to bring organizations and the community together to discuss and share information related to each pillar of the drug strategy. Topic areas included Indigenous Services, Community Safety, Harm Reduction and Prevention. Presentations and training were provided by B'saanibamaadsiwin, Mobile Crisis Response Team (West Parry Sound OPP and Canadian Mental Health Association), Aids Committee of North Bay and Area, North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit, and Canadian Mental Health Association - Muskoka Parry Sound. A Public Health Nurse from Sexual Health attended and presented at the Harm Reduction event.

## *Healthy Schools*

The Health Unit provided support to the Near North District School Board (NND SB) in developing its **Outdoor Learning Administrative Guideline**, officially adopted in September 2024. This guideline represents a significant step in promoting outdoor education within the region and is available for review on the [NND SB website](#).

The development of the guideline was facilitated by the success of the **Outdoor Ways of Learning and Sharing (OWLS)** initiative and the **Forest Schools Practitioners Course**, a collaborative partnership between the Health Unit, NND SB, the Canadian Ecology Centre, and the Child & Nature Alliance of Canada. These initiatives provided a structured platform to highlight the diverse benefits of outdoor learning, driving the creation and adoption of the guideline. The initial groundwork for this project was highlighted in the [June 2022 BOH report](#).

Outdoor learning offers numerous advantages, as highlighted in the guideline:

- **Skill Development:** Nurtures creativity, resourcefulness, and problem-solving as students address real-world challenges.
- **Mental Health Benefits:** Spending time outdoors has been shown to improve mental health, reduce stress levels, and promote emotional well-being.
- **Physical Health:** Encourages physical activity, fostering overall physical health and resilience.

This collaborative effort underscores the value of community partnerships in advancing educational practices that align with broader health and well-being priorities. The Health Unit remains committed to supporting initiatives that enhance student experiences and promote sustainable, impactful learning environments.

## **Human Resources**

### *Occupational Health and Safety*

An Occupational Health and Safety education session was held in the North Bay office (Clinical Services and Reception staff) to provide practical training on several procedures related to emergency events, handling sharps, and finding illicit substances. A total of 37 staff attended this training.

We are resuming the emergency “Code-of-the-Month” for staff to review one or two emergency “colour code” procedures each month through 2025, to be repeated annually.

### *Professional Development*

The Learning Together Circles (LTC) were implemented, designed to provide staff with an opportunity to learn informally about specific subject matter, while providing a LTC Lead an opportunity to learn teaching/facilitation skills. The priorities for this training are technology related, and so far, 9 staff attended a session on Adobe and 25 staff attended a session on

Teams/SharePoint/One Drive. Upcoming sessions include To Do and Planner, with additional topics added as needed.

### *Staffing*

The following new, permanent positions were recently filled:

- Manager, Indigenous Engagement and Development (1.00 FTE) effective May 5, 2025
- Executive Director, Organizational Effectiveness (1.00 FTE) effective January 13, 2025

There has been no net increase in FTE of permanent positions.

*Approved by*

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