

Next phase of vaccine rollout arrives

By Mark PavilonsEditorLocal Journalism Initiative

The tide is turning in the battle against COVID-19. Queen's Park announced Friday it will enter phase two of the vaccination plan next month, getting vaccines into older adults and those at risk. The focus will be based on age and risk. This approach is designed to save lives, protect those at risk of serious illness and to stop the virus from spreading. Details were provided late last week by Premier Doug Ford, Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, Solicitor General Sylvia Jones, and General Rick Hillier (retired), Chair of the COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Task Force. "Due to the incredible work of an army of people we have a solid vaccine distribution plan and we are ready to get needles into arms as soon as the doses arrive," said Premier Ford. "This is a true Team Ontario effort and we are mobilizing our greatest asset - the people of Ontario. Vaccines will be administered in hospital clinics, primary care settings, mass vaccination sites, mobile clinics and pharmacies across the province by dedicated, caring and compassionate frontline health care heroes. "With vaccine supply stabilizing and over two million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine expected from the federal government before the end of March, the province will enter the next phase. Between April and July, upwards of nine million Ontarians will be vaccinated. During Phase Two, groups that will receive the vaccine include: "Older adults between 60-79 years of age. "Individuals with specific health conditions and some primary caregivers. "People who live and work in congregate settings and some primary caregivers. "People who live in hot spots with high rates of death, hospitalizations and transmission. "Certain workers who cannot work from home. "Thanks to the hard work of our health care partners and frontline heroes, Ontario's vaccine rollout is making a positive difference and helping to save the lives of some of our most vulnerable," said Minister Elliott. "We continue to ramp up capacity and are committed to administering as many doses, as quickly as possible to every Ontarian who wants a vaccine. "Phase one of the rollout is well under way, with more than 820,000 doses administered and over 269,000 Ontarians fully immunized. More than 95 per cent of long-term care residents are fully immunized and public health units are working with homes to vaccinate staff and essential caregivers as a priority. Some local public health units, based on local context and capacity, have been able to vaccinate some people aged over 80, before the anticipated timeframe of mid-March. By focusing early vaccination efforts on long-term care residents, combined with public health measures, Ontario has notably rapidly reduced infections and the daily death rates in long-term care homes. Starting March 15, the province will launch an online booking system and a provincial customer service desk to answer questions and support appointment bookings at mass immunization clinics. This will initially support individuals over the age of 80 as part of Phase One, eventually extending to more groups during Phase Two. While some public health units are currently using their own booking systems to vaccinate individuals aged 80 and over, it is anticipated that the majority of public health units will transition to the provincial booking system after it has launched. "The fight against COVID-19 continues to be our government's top priority," said Solicitor General Sylvia Jones. "With the approval of the AstraZeneca vaccine, and now the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, and with increased supplies coming into the province, this gives us renewed focus to get even more Ontarians vaccinated sooner. We've made tremendous progress and ask that Ontarians continue to stay the course to protect themselves and keep their families, friends and communities safe. "As supply increases, Ontarians will be able to get vaccinated with the three Health Canada approved vaccines in several new settings. In addition to hospitals, mobile clinics and mass vaccination clinics, the province is working with the pharmacy sector and with primary care professionals to offer vaccinations in primary care settings and community locations in collaboration with public health units. A pilot for pharmacy vaccine administration is planned for mid-March in select regions, including Toronto, Windsor and the Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox & Addington region, followed by specific primary care pilots in collaboration with public health units. Ontario will enter Phase Three when vaccines are available for every Ontarian who wishes to be immunized. While vaccines will not be mandated, during Phase Three, people will be strongly encouraged to get vaccinated. In York, appointments for those 80+ began March 1. King Mayor Steve Pellegrini said he's hoping that King can use the Trisan Centre for its own vaccination centre when the time comes. The Province will mail out a flyer to homes in Ontario and will utilize media and social media, public announcements and through Public Health units to notify residents. The plan is for residents to get the vaccine close to home. York Region has developed a multi-faceted communication strategy developed to support three main goals: "Increase awareness and understanding of COVID-19 vaccines. "Increase number of individuals receiving COVID-19 vaccination (goal to vaccinate 75% population). "Dispel misinformation, myths, harmful untruths which contribute to vaccine hesitancy. "The roll out of vaccinations on this scale is new to all of us, and as

the province has said, it will not be perfect. What is important is we get available vaccines into arms,? the mayor said. The federal government, according to a spokesperson with MP Deb Schulte's office, has played an important role in the vaccination process, including the procurement of vaccines and Health Canada's approval of vaccine candidates. But roll-out is the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments. The National Advisory Committee on Immunization has released guidance for provinces and territories in administering all vaccines authorized for use in Canada, however, the definitive schedule for the vaccine rollout is ultimately determined by provincial and territorial governments.