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PROVINCIAL POLITICS

Doug Ford promises new COVID-19 testing plan as more people come up positive

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Frustrated yet again with continuing shortfalls in Ontario's COVID-19 testing, Premier Doug Ford is promising a new plan next week aimed at workers on-the-job and people without symptoms.

"Let's start getting out there and testing everyone possible. That's the only way we can get a handle on this," Ford said Thursday, citing a desire to test truckers, autoworkers, taxi drivers and staff in food processing plants, among others.

This latest pledge to improve testing came after Ministry of Health figures revealed Ontario has been testing fewer people for COVID-19 this week but more people are coming up positive for the highly contagious virus.

On Monday, labs across the province used just one-quarter their testing capacity and that rose to only half by Wednesday — the same type of problem that so riled Ford last month he vowed to be "like a dog on a bone" with health officials.

He supersized that threat Thursday.

"I'll be like an 800-pound gorilla on their backs every single day if I have to until I see these numbers go up," said Ford, who noted he's relying on the advice of experts like chief medical officer Dr. David Williams.

"There's a difference between what I want and what's going to happen," the premier said.

The split is obvious, said one scientist.

"There is an evident disconnect between the premier who feels there is something wrong with our testing performance, and our chief medical officers of health who are defending our current approach," said Colin Furness, an infection control epidemiologist at the University of Toronto.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said she's not convinced the province has a handle on testing after targets have been repeatedly missed.

"Doug Ford needs to stop the rhetoric and get to work on the solutions," she said.

"It feels like Groundhog Day every time the premier complains about low testing numbers," Green Leader Mike Schreiner added. "The premier must tell us why he felt confident pushing Ontario into stage one reopening when our testing system simply wasn't ready."

Epidemiologists and opposition parties have been long pushing for more widespread testing to get a better picture of the virus as more businesses open and risks of transmission increase with more people out and about.

“We simply need to be proactive, testing people based on occupational exposure, and we need to bring testing to the taxi garage, the grocery store, etcetera...this is where infections will be found. Waiting for people to become desperately ill is the wrong approach,” Furness added Thursday.

“No reason why we couldn’t be maxing out our capacity every single day. In fact, we’d need a lot more capacity to be properly proactive.”

Ford agreed with that approach but did not set a goal or a timeline for a higher level of testing than the current maximum capacity.

“We can’t just be testing people with symptoms. We’ve got to start going to the broader public and start testing as many people as possible, asymptomatic people. Until we do that, in my opinion...we can’t get our hands around the whole system. How do we know how many asymptomatic people are out there right now?”

There were 413 new cases in Ontario as of Wednesday at 4 p.m., up from an adjusted figure of 345 for the same day a week ago, according to the Ministry of Health. There is a time lag between the official figures and the daily Star compilation as of 5 p.m. Thursday, which found 404 new confirmed and probable cases in the previous 24 hours. It was the third straight day with more than 400 new cases after 10 days below 400.

Although the province’s network of government, hospital and commercial labs can process more than 20,000 nasal swabs daily, they handled 10,506 Wednesday.

That further fuelled concerns the wasted capacity is a lost opportunity to more closely track the virus around the province.

“We’ve seen it go up over the last, I think it’s five days now and the testing, actually, the numbers haven’t been there. So that’s concerning,” Ford said.

“I’d understand it if we were testing 25,000 people or 20,000 and numbers creep up...but that’s not the case right now.”

Williams, the chief medical officer, said the recent numbers of new cases at higher levels than last week is “disappointing.”

“We’re pretty well at a plateau, whereas we’d hoped to keep coming down in that regard,” he told a news conference where he said some of the new cases are still coming from nursing homes, but could not say how many were from long-term care or spread in the community.

Health Minister Christine Elliott blamed the lower testing numbers on not enough people showing up at the province’s more than 100 assessment centres and pleaded for Ontarians with mild symptoms they fear are COVID-19 to make appointments to get checked.

Until late last week, centres were turning away people with mild symptoms but that was changed in a directive as the province sought to test more broadly.

“Perhaps our messaging and our communication wasn’t as clear as it should be and we’re working on that now,” said Williams.

Testing has been a problem all week after a blitz on residents and staff in the hard-hit nursing-home sector was completed, leaving plenty of capacity to spare and infuriating critics that there wasn’t a plan ready to take advantage of it.

“We need to significantly increase testing volumes,” acknowledged Elliott, who revealed Wednesday in the legislature’s question period that the government is working with the business community on expanded testing.

According to the Star tally, the province has had 25,768 cases of COVID-19 since the first was reported in late January after a Toronto-area resident returned from a trip to China.

There were 26 more deaths as of 5 p.m. Thursday, bringing the total number of fatalities to 2,091, the bulk of them in nursing homes.

The Ministry of Health said there were 984 people still in hospital, including 155 in intensive care and 117 of them on ventilators to assist with breathing.

Those ICU numbers have been coming down in recent weeks.

Across Canada, there have been 80,555 cases and 6,062 deaths.



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