

# PANDEMIC PLANNING FOR NON-PROFIT HOUSING PROVIDERS

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*In context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this infoON is intended to help non-profit housing providers understand what a pandemic plan is, why it is important, and how to develop an effective plan. It will also reinforce the importance of safeguarding staff and tenants by ensuring everyone has the information and means to practice good hygiene, social distancing and, if needed, self-isolation.*

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## INTRODUCTION: THE 2020 COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Over the last several weeks, the rapid evolution of COVID-19 into a global pandemic confronting all countries including Canada, has captured the attention of media, governments, and Canadian citizens. Growing concern about the potential impact of this pandemic that could affect millions of Canadians has prompted many organizations, public and private, to take a critical look at their operations to determine how they can continue to provide their vital services while protecting their staff and service users.

### Important first steps include:

- Encouraging all staff and residents to practice good hygiene. Remind employees and residents to: wash their hands thoroughly and often, avoid touching their face, cough into their sleeve and to keep their work spaces clean by wiping down keyboards, phones, desks and countertops with antibacterial wipes. These protocols should be verbally shared and reinforced with visual reminders in the workplace (posters are available from the [Ontario government](#)).
- Making it clear that your organization's policy is that people who do not feel well should stay home. Outline to staff the sick time they are entitled to and make it clear that given the extenuating circumstances, the organization would rather err on having someone stay home than coming into work sick. Given that the health care system will be facing incredible pressure, employers should waive any requirements you might normally have for staff to provide notes from a medical professional for sick days. The Ontario provincial government announced legislation on March 16, 2020 that, if passed, would prevent employers from asking for notes from employees taking leave due to COVID-19.

- Encouraging and supporting social distancing. If possible, arrange for staff to work remotely or with staggered hours. Reschedule meetings if possible or conduct them virtually.

Unfortunately many of the above steps in addition to slowing the spread of COVID-19 will also result in your organization experiencing staff shortages. It is critical for your organization to develop a plan for how it will deal with the staffing and supply shortages that will inevitably come with a pandemic such as COVID-19.

While preparation and the development of a plan for managing a pandemic is important for organizations of all sizes, it is especially important, and particularly challenging, for small organizations with fewer staff. Due to staffing levels, smaller organizations will likely have to depend more on their volunteers and/or board members in a crisis. Involving these groups requires a great deal more planning than preparing staff alone. These individuals may not be as familiar with the critical roles that staff fulfill and will require more information. They may also have other responsibilities to balance alongside supporting the non-profit in a crisis situation. The organization may need to get creative with solutions such as implementing office hours to accommodate volunteers.

Resources related to COVID-19 have been developed by all levels of government, associations, and other community or provincial organizations including the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (links to many of these resources are available at the end of this document). These resources can provide you with a great deal of information and tools related to pandemics and COVID-19 in particular, as well as strategies that you can use to prepare your organization and manage operations. Though useful, these resources can also be overwhelming and tend to be targeted toward larger bureaucratic organizations.

The following InfoON focuses on some of the issues faced by small community housing providers, though the process and challenges identified are ones that affect all housing providers. It also includes a checklist of key planning considerations for the Covid-19 pandemic (Appendix A).

Regardless of your size, in an emergency situation it is vital for all stakeholders that a plan of action is available to staff and volunteers on the frontlines and that appropriate information is shared with tenants.

## **PANDEMIC PLANNING FOR NON-PROFIT HOUSING PROVIDERS**

### **What is a pandemic plan?**

A pandemic plan outlines the most critical roles, responsibilities, and functions within an organization and ensures that information, training and resources are available if individuals, other than those who usually perform the work, are needed to step in to fill unfamiliar roles. There is a responsibility on the part of community housing provider staff and their Board of Directors to ensure that a certain minimal level of service is maintained for as long as possible. This is not limited to frontline work with tenants such as rent collection. Available staff must be able to perform basic maintenance tasks and must know who to contact to perform more complex ones. Developing a pandemic plan means assessing your organization's resources, reviewing its policies, and documenting the critical knowledge of each staff member relative to their role in the organization. It should also include contingency options in the event that despite the above measures a housing provider is not able to continue certain aspects of their regular operations.

### **Pandemic Plans vs. Emergency Preparedness Plans**

Your organization may have already completed an emergency preparedness plan to guide staff operations in the event of a natural (e.g. flood, tornado) or other type (e.g. fire) of disaster. These plans are not the same as a pandemic plan since they generally identify short-term solutions that operate on the assumption that, if the conditions are severe enough, help and resources will be available from outside of the affected area.

In contrast, a pandemic plan must consider a longer period of interruption in terms of accessing goods and services, along with staff, board, and volunteer absenteeism. Your non-profit may have to operate for a prolonged period of time with a reduced number of staff and limited access to community-based expertise, making preparation and planning all the more important.

## **DEVELOPING A PANDEMIC PLAN**

While the specifics of any pandemic situation will vary, your organization's staff and Board of Directors should have preparations in place prior to an event occurring. Unfortunately given the number of competing demands faced by non-profit providers, many have not had an opportunity to develop a plan. Those without a plan in place will be faced with the daunting task of quickly pulling a plan together while in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first step in developing the plan is to outline the tasks that need to be performed to ensure the ongoing provision of critical services. Identify staff or volunteers who can potentially fulfill those critical roles and ensure that their knowledge can be shared and/or documented for others to use.

### **STEP ONE: Identify Critical Services**

- ***What are the most important tasks or responsibilities carried out by your staff or volunteers?***
- ***Which tasks and responsibilities are vital to the health and safety of your tenants, their guests, and on-site staff?***
- ***Which programs or services can be postponed in the event of a pandemic and which must be maintained as a priority?***

These types of questions will help your staff, board members, and volunteers to identify the essential or vital services your organization provides. Depending on your organization's size and structure, it may be appropriate to use these questions to identify priority tasks and responsibilities by seeking people's views at multiple levels, including frontline/departmental, management, and the Board of Directors. This will help to ensure that all critical tasks are identified and the consultative process will also help to create buy-in for the exercise.

Identify services provided by your organization at each level, with particular attention to the frontline or departmental level. Keep in mind that many of the functions that are critical for an organization to maintain during a pandemic are routine and easily overlooked, such as cleaning common areas, issuing payroll, and shoveling or maintaining walkways. It can be helpful to review individual job descriptions during this process to ensure that all activities are accounted for.

Once the services have been identified, break them down into their individual functions, then select the functions which are critical to maintain in the event of a pandemic. Critical functions are the ones that the non-profit must try to fulfill no matter what. For example, maintenance staff may identify one of the services as "grounds/exterior maintenance". They may, in turn, identify the following functions and, subsequently, the critical functions.

**Example of Critical Services Identified by Maintenance Staff**

Service	Functions	Critical Functions	Number of Staff Required	Number of Training Hours Required
<b>Grounds/ exterior maintenance</b>	Pruning shrubs and maintaining gardens	Clearing walkways and entrances of obstructions	1	<1
	Cutting grass	Snow and ice removal from walkways and parking lots	2-3	<1
	Clearing walkways and entrances of obstructions	Pruning shrubs that obstruct visibility from driveway	1	<1
	Snow and ice removal from walkways and parking lots			
	Cleaning / washing windows			

*In this example, brainstorming by the maintenance staff identified several critical responsibilities that protect the health and safety of tenants, staff, and visitors and which need to be performed even with reduced staffing.*

During the identification process, give thought to the minimum number of staff and/or volunteers necessary to perform each critical function and the amount of training time that an inexperienced individual would need in order to fully understand the task(s). Staff should also consider whether, in a pandemic, there could be increased demand for that function, necessitating additional staffing coverage or time. For example, depending on the volume of traffic in your properties, common elements like elevator buttons, buzzer panels,

and doorknobs may need to be cleaned as frequently as hourly, while common areas, such as lobbies, may need to be cleaned on a daily basis.

Finally, identify the supplies and materials that your organization requires to complete the critical functions. Some supplies, such as cleaners, hand sanitizers, masks, etc., may be increasingly difficult to purchase during a pandemic and a shortage may negatively affect the services your organization is able to provide. Making a list and building a stock of these supplies can help to ensure that your staff and volunteers have the tools they need to fulfill the critical functions of your organization.

### **Critical Supplies**

The supplies required to ensure the continuous delivery of critical functions will vary depending on the size and nature of the non-profit the type of structure (highrise, low rise or town house) and building systems. However, the following supplies are likely to be needed by most organizations operating during a pandemic:

- cleansers, such as hand sanitizers with 60% or more alcohol
- a well-stocked first aid kit
- facial tissues
- protective facial masks such as N95 respirators (learn to use facial masks correctly to ensure that you and your staff are protected)
- rubber gloves
- maintenance equipment such as furnace filters, rock salt, and disinfecting or anti-bacterial surface cleaners.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Make a list of your organization's critical functions.*
- Identify the skills required to perform critical functions and the time required for training.*
- Determine the supplies and materials that your organization currently has on-hand and what is missing .*
- Make and distribute a list of the suppliers and companies that provide you with materials or services so that others can access them if necessary.*

## STEP TWO: Assess your Organization's Capacity

Once the critical tasks of each service have been identified and agreed to, it is management's responsibility to develop a comprehensive plan based on the critical responsibilities that have been identified. There are several issues which must be considered during the development of a pandemic plan including: decision making structures, staff and volunteer training in other areas of operation, and how to communicate the plan to staff, volunteers, and tenants.

### **Organizational Decision-Making**

When the organization's critical responsibilities are being reviewed, thought should be given to how decisions can and should be made when the traditional decision-making structure is not present. How will decisions be made in the absence of management? Which staff will be permitted to make important operational decisions, such as approving payments, ordering supplies or retaining outside contractors and under what conditions or limitations are they operating? In the event that your management team is unavailable, will staff make decisions? Will the Board of Directors step in? If certain key members of the Board are not available who will be their backups?

Clearly defining how decisions must be made and who has the authority to make them will ensure that individuals and the organization are held accountable for the decisions. Remember any changes in current practices regarding decision-making need to be approved by your Board of Directors.

### **Training and Knowledge Transfer**

During the review process, consider the skillsets and expertise of the staff person(s) required to perform the critical responsibilities. Some tasks will require little or no training. In these cases, it may be decided that the most appropriate strategy is to develop an abbreviated job description or set of instructions to guide the individual(s) responsible for performing the task.

You may decide that specialized knowledge or skill is required to perform some critical tasks. Cross-training between staff with appropriate skills may provide the necessary learning opportunities to prepare for some or all of the critical tasks. Some tasks will require expertise that cannot or should not be passed between staff. In the absence of appropriately trained staff, external expertise may be required. Ensure that staff and volunteers know who to contact in these situations and have their contact information readily available.

**Staffing, Absenteeism, Replacement,  
and Recruitment**

Depending on the size of your non-profit, the loss of even one or two staff may severely impact your ability to fulfill your critical responsibilities. If you operate a non-profit with fewer than 10 full-time staff it is important to consider the involvement of your Board of Directors and other volunteers in your organization's operations. There is a high degree of probability that in organizations of this size, a loss of a third or more of staff for an extended period of time would severely impact operating capacity. As a result, assigning staff duties they do not usually do is a critical human resource issue that should be negotiated beforehand. If it was not previously agreed upon, you will need to rely on staff's willingness to take on additional hours and/or responsibilities in times of need such as a pandemic. Their willingness is more likely obtained if you demonstrate flexibility in supporting their need to take sick time or for flexibility in their work schedules to allow them to care for sick family members or supervise children who are home because of school or daycare closures.

Including volunteers and board members in the organization's day-to-day operation requires planning and preparation. Despite their involvement in the non-profit, it is unlikely that many volunteers will have experience with its day-to-day operations. It is also likely that, like staff, many volunteers and board members will be unavailable. It is important to be flexible in accommodating the role that volunteers are able to play. For example, the office

**KEY CONSIDERATION:  
Tenant Supports**

When you are identifying your critical tasks it is important to consider the role that staff and community-based agencies may play in supporting your tenants. If you are a supportive housing provider, consider how your staff or staff from community-based agencies will continue to provide support to tenants who require it. Involve your community partners in the discussion and identify their plans.

If your organization does not have support staff, engaging with community-based partners is even more important as your ability to respond to tenant needs may be further reduced.

Keep in mind that the staff's role in supporting tenants can be more informal. Plan how you will communicate with tenants about reduced services, including how to reach the correct person in an emergency and how to pay their rent. Consider developing a system for checking in with your tenants, particularly if you house vulnerable individuals such as the elderly or individuals living with disabilities. In dealing with a pandemic all staff will need to get creative and think outside of the regular ways of doing things to ensure that the needs of tenants and the non-profit are met. For example, a confidential email link could be established between the housing provider and their tenants to facilitate communication in both directions.



may need to be open some evenings or on weekends to accommodate the availability of volunteers who will staff it.

### **Staff and Volunteer Communications during a Pandemic**

Depending on the critical functions identified by staff and the level of absenteeism that you may experience during a pandemic, communicating to and between staff and volunteers responsible for the non-profit's operation is essential. It will not be business as usual and the typical formal and informal communications strategies that your organization uses may or may not be available. Plan for how staff and volunteers will communicate with one another during the course of the day and how information will be passed from one person to the next should the first become ill. Consider implementing:

- a written log for each critical task for staff and volunteers to transfer important information, issues, or tasks to follow-up on to the next person to perform that task or role
- regular, perhaps daily, phone calls with all staff and volunteers so that information and issues can be shared
- telephone lists with cell phone numbers to allow staff and volunteers to remain in contact with one another (it may be necessary to implement a policy to reimburse staff and volunteers for any costs incurred on personal cell phones used for work purposes during the course of the pandemic)

The pandemic plan should also include instructions regarding the information that must be communicated to tenants. This information may include:

- emergency contact numbers
- office hours
- rent payment protocol (if different)
- information regarding the nature of the pandemic
- strategies to protect themselves and others
- local community resources

### **KEY CONSIDERATION: Staff Absenteeism**

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) and other national and international bodies estimate that a pandemic, regardless of its severity, will affect approximately 35% of the population. Staff will not only be absent as a result of individual illness, but also to provide care to family members (including children in the event of school or day care closures), or out of fear of being exposed to the virus in the workplace. Board members and volunteers who you may be depending on to help operate the non-profit will face the same issues. As a result, even a relatively minor outbreak could have a large impact on your ability to perform day-to-day operations during a pandemic.

Part of the preparation of a pandemic plan may include collecting information and resources that your tenants will find helpful such as walk-in clinics, food bank locations, rental assistance programs or how to contact Telehealth Ontario. Much of this type of information may have already been prepared by and be available in your municipal government's pandemic or emergency preparedness plan.

### ACTION ITEMS:

- Determine who will be able to make what decisions on behalf of the organization, what processes they should undertake and get Board approval as necessary.*
- Identify a training strategy for transferring knowledge regarding critical functions to back-up staff, particularly for complex or more specialized tasks.*
- Collaborate with external service providers and community-based partners to ensure that tenants will continue to receive support.*
- Take the time to identify all of the potential groups (excluding staff), such as board members and volunteers, that your organization can draw on in order to continue to provide services to tenants and to operate the non-profit. Remember to cast a wide net as it could be challenging to find available individuals during a pandemic.*
- Set up a protocol to ensure that information and decisions are documented and available for staff who may need to know at a later date.*
- Locate community resources, programs, services, and other information that your tenants may need during the course of a pandemic and prepare templates to relay this information.*

### STEP THREE: Communication, Training, and Regular Review

Once your organization's critical functions have been identified and the non-profit's capacity assessed, it's important to assemble the information and decisions that have been made into an easily accessible document for your staff and volunteers. Once a draft of the plan has been completed, ask staff to review it to ensure that it is correct (this should be done by staff who regularly perform the task) and easily understandable (this should be done by staff or volunteers unfamiliar with the task). If cross-training for some functions has been identified, then this should be initiated in a timely manner.

The final pandemic plan should be widely communicated to staff, volunteers and board members. It must be a living document that is reviewed regularly to ensure that it continues to reflect the organization's needs in the evolving situation. It should be stored in multiple sites, in multiple formats (i.e. paper, electronic, etc) so that it is easily accessible to staff at all times.

**ACTION ITEMS:**

- Ask staff to review the document for accuracy and clarity.*
- Ask volunteers and board members to review the document to ensure that the instructions are easily understood.*
- Communicate the revised pandemic plan to all staff, volunteers, and board members affected.*
- Review and revise regularly!*

**HELPFUL RESOURCES**

The following websites contain information that may be helpful to you and your staff in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Local public health units**

<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx>

**Public Health Ontario**

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/diseases-and-conditions/infectious-diseases/respiratory-diseases/novel-coronavirus>

**Public Health Agency of Canada**

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html>

**Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19, World Health Organization**

<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>

**Do you have questions about developing or implementing your pandemic plan?**

Contact ONPHA's Member Support by email at [member.support@onpha.org](mailto:member.support@onpha.org)

## APPENDIX A: COVID-19 PLANNING CHECK LIST

The COVID-19 pandemic is caused by a new, highly contagious and virulent virus which has the capacity to spread rapidly from human to human. In order to effectively respond to this pandemic, housing organizations should implement a number of measures as soon as possible. These actions can be organized into 3 critical areas of initiative.

### 1. LEARN

Learn as much as you can about the pandemic and how to respond to it and share this information with your staff and residents.

### 2. ORGANIZE

Put in place the organizational tools you will need to respond effectively.

### 3. ACT

Use the knowledge you have acquired and the organizational measures you have implemented to take actions that will protect the health of your staff and residents and allow you to continue to provide your important services to your community.

## LEARN:

- Monitor community public health websites and public messages. Liaise as appropriate to coordinate the non-profit's pandemic-related activities.
- Identify sources of up-to-date, reliable pandemic information from community public health, emergency management, and other sources and keep track of the links.
- Evaluate employee access to and availability of occupational and mental health and social services during a pandemic, including corporate, community, and faith-based resources, and improve services as needed.
- Develop and disseminate programs and materials covering pandemic fundamentals (e.g., signs and symptoms, modes of transmission), personal and family protection and response strategies (e.g., handwashing, coughing/sneezing etiquette, contingency plans).

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- Anticipate employee fear and anxiety, rumours, and misinformation and plan communications accordingly.
- Provide information for the at-home care of ill employees and family members.
- Ensure that communications are culturally appropriate and available in the languages spoken by your staff and residents.
- Disseminate information to employees about pandemic preparedness and response plans.
- Identify employees and tenants with special needs, and incorporate their unique requirements into your preparedness plan.
- Identify community sources for timely and accurate pandemic information and resources for obtaining counter-measures (e.g. vaccines and anti-virals if and when available).
- Collaborate with insurers, health plans, and major local healthcare facilities to share your pandemic plans and understand their capabilities and plans.
- Collaborate with local public health agencies and/or emergency responders to participate in their planning processes, share your pandemic plans, and understand their capabilities and plans.
- Communicate with local and/or provincial public health agencies and/or emergency responders about assets and/or services your organization could contribute to the community.
- Share best practices with other organizations to improve community response efforts.

## ORGANIZE:

- Identify a pandemic coordinator and/or team with defined roles and responsibilities for preparedness and response-planning.
- Identify essential employees and other critical inputs (e.g. materials, suppliers, subcontractor services/ products, and logistics) required to maintain business operations by location and function during a pandemic. Plan for impact on the budget and/or cash flow.
- Set up authorities, triggers, and procedures for activating and terminating the response plan.
- Identify core people and core skills and plan for large absence (10 to 50 per cent).
- Wherever possible, switch in-person meetings to virtual using phones, video conferencing etc.
- Establish an emergency communications plan and review regularly. This plan includes identification of key contacts (with back-ups), chain of communications, and processes for tracking and communicating operations and employee status.
- Recruit and prepare a supplementary workforce (e.g. contractors, employees in other job titles/descriptions, retirees).

**ACT:**

- Develop and plan for scenarios likely to result in an increase or decrease in demand for your services.
- Establish policies for preventing the spread of COVID-19 at your worksite (e.g. promoting respiratory hygiene/ cough etiquette, and direction to those exhibiting influenza symptoms to leave the worksite and seek medical care).
- Implement protection measures for staff from possible exposure and potential risks to their own health.
- Forecast and plan for employee absences during a pandemic due to factors such as personal illness, family member illness, community containment measures and quarantines, school and/or business closures, and public transportation closures.
- Establish policies for employee compensation and sick-leave absences unique to a pandemic (e.g., non-punitive, liberal leave), including policies on when a previously ill person is no longer infectious and can return to work after illness.
- Establish policies for a flexible worksite (e.g. working from home) and flexible work hours (e.g. staggered shifts).
- Establish policies for employees who have been exposed to COVID-19, are suspected to be ill, or become ill at the worksite (e.g., infection control response, immediate mandatory sick leave).
- Implement guidelines to modify the frequency and type of face-to-face contact (e.g. handshaking, seating in meetings, office layout, shared workstations) among employees and between employees and customers.
- Promote or provide supplies for infection control (e.g. hand-hygiene products, tissues and receptacles for their disposal) in high traffic locations such as the office, main lobby, laundry room or community room.
- Enhance communications and information technology infrastructures as needed to support employee telecommuting and remote access