

COVID-19 Pandemic Preparedness Toolkit for Ontario Businesses

Prepared by
The Ontario Chamber of Commerce



with the support of
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OVERVIEW

The health, safety and well-being of our staff, members and community are of the utmost importance to us.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), previously known as the 2019 novel coronavirus, is a pandemic that already has or will imminently disrupt the operations of employers, the health care system, and public institutions. It is critical that businesses are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to respond to protect public health and ensure the continued essential operations of their organizations.

Businesses need to be prepared for any human-resources or operational-related disruptions. It is important for organizations to consider whether and how some aspects of their operations can be continued remotely. While some companies have opted to have their staff work from home, working virtually is essential if quarantines and self-isolation are required. It is equally important to anticipate staff absences for periods of about two weeks at the height of a severe pandemic wave, and lower levels of staff absence for a few weeks either side of the peak.

The guidelines and resources contained in this toolkit have been prepared to help businesses plan for and adapt to the disruption of COVID-19 and any future influenza pandemics.

PROTECTING YOURSELF AGAINST COVID-19

The first consideration of any preparedness plan must be your own health. The coronavirus is spread through direct contact with the secretions from an infected person; either through sneezing, coughing or by touching an object that has been contaminated. It is not certain how long the virus that causes COVID-19 survives on surfaces. However, according to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention the virus may remain viable for hours to days on surfaces made from a variety of materials.

Currently, there is no vaccine available to protect against the COVID-19.

The Ontario Ministry of Health is asking the public to first contact Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000 or your local public health unit if you are experiencing symptoms. They are also asking employers not to send their employees to the emergency room as a first response and not to visit an assessment centre unless you have symptoms. Do not call 911 unless it is an emergency.

To lower your risk of infection, take the following precautions:

Wash your hands with soap and water regularly and for at least 20 seconds at a time.	Use alcohol-based hand sanitizers if you are not able to wash your hands.	Avoid touching your face, specifically your eyes, nose, and mouth.
Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.	Avoid shaking hands.	Practice 'social distancing', including maintaining at least 1 metre (or 3 feet) distance between yourself and others.
Avoid contact with people who are sick.	If possible, cough or sneeze into a disposable tissue and discard. Use your elbow only if necessary. Follow with thoroughly washing your hands.	Stay at home if you are feeling unwell; this includes not only your place of business but also public places such as stores, restaurants and bars, or other gathering places.
Get enough rest, exercise regularly, and eat a balanced diet.	Keep your stress levels in check.	Get an annual flu vaccine.

The situation is evolving rapidly. Regularly review direction and updates from the Ministry of Health and Health Canada.

POSSIBLE IMPACTS ON YOUR BUSINESSES

A pandemic may have several impacts on your business, for example:

- Customer orders may be cancelled or cannot be filled.
- Supplies of materials needed for ongoing business activity may be disrupted. Further problems can be expected if goods are imported by air or land over international borders.
- The availability of services from sub-contractors may be affected (this may affect maintenance of key equipment).
- Demand for business services may be affected – demand for some services may increase (e.g. internet access, anything health-related); while demand for others may fall (e.g. tourism, cultural events, marketing and promotion).
- Public meetings and gatherings may be cancelled by authorities or organizers due to concerns about the spread of the virus and/or anticipated low attendance. For example, Ottawa health officials are now asking for events of all sizes to be cancelled.

Sectors that depend on heavy foot traffic – retail, leisure, gaming, lodging, and restaurant – industries could especially take a hit as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Small businesses and other sectors such as mining or manufacturing face unique challenges as they cannot easily work from home. People are being advised to avoid unnecessary travel and densely populated public areas and any place where people congregate in confined spaces. Consumers are likely to cut down on travel and leisure related expenditures, including transportation, hotels, cruises, entertainment, and visits to public venues.

For companies that are particularly concerned about supply chain disruption, EDC has released a [webinar on managing the impact of the pandemic](#) on global supply chains.

All businesses are likely to be concerned about the immediate financial impacts of a pandemic. Some options to consider as you adapt to a period of disruption include:

- Review and understand your business interruption insurance.
- Audit payable and receivable transactions.
- Reconsider capital investment plans.
- Assess your variable costs to determine where they could be lowered or eliminated, or converted to fixed costs.
- Consider alternative financing options.
- Consider alternative revenue streams.

Work from home

Several companies (that can) have chosen to work by allowing their employees to work from home, closing their offices to outside visitors or suspending all in-person contact until the public health risk reduces.

Staff absences

The most significant impact on your business is likely to be staff absences.

During an outbreak or pandemic, staff absences can be expected for many reasons, including:

- Personal illness/incapacity or heightened vulnerability to the coronavirus due to an underlying condition.
- Government-directed requirement to prevent the spread of the virus, self-isolate or quarantine.
- Staying at home to care for ill family members.
- Looking after school-aged children in the event school is closed. For example, the Government of Ontario issued a Ministerial Order to close all publicly funded schools in Ontario for two weeks following March break, in response to the emergence in Ontario of COVID-19. This means that Ontario schools have been ordered to remain closed from March 14 through to April 5, 2020.
- People may simply feel safer at home, particularly if their job requires a commute on public transit or regular contact with the public.

Businesses should consider the applicable legislation and their policies regarding paid and unpaid leave of absences and determine which absences would be covered and whether any changes need to be made on an interim basis during an outbreak. However, several companies have gone above and beyond legislative requirements to help support their employees, continue business operations, and safeguard public health.

Governments response to the situation is rapidly evolving and it is important for employers to keep up to date. The Government of Ontario has recently announced they are introducing measures for employers including ensuring “protected leave & remove the requirement for employees to obtain sick notes prior to taking time off for self-isolation or quarantine.”

The [*Ontario Employment Standards Act, 2000*](#) (“ESA”) contains a number of leave provisions that could apply in a pandemic situation. Once an employee has worked for an employer for at least two consecutive weeks, the ESA provides for three days of unpaid leave each calendar year due to personal illness, injury or medical emergency.

Employees may also be entitled to use family responsibility leave days for absences relating to a pandemic situation. Once an employee has worked for an employer for at least two consecutive weeks, the employee has the right to take up to three days of unpaid leave each calendar year because of an illness, injury, medical emergency or urgent matter relating to a close relative (there is a list of relatives covered in the ESA).

In addition to the more common leaves of absence (such as sick leave or family responsibility leave which may be applicable during a pandemic,) the ESA also provides for job protected leaves of absence for employees in urgent circumstances. That is, an employee may be entitled to leave work where the provincial government declares an “emergency” under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act (EMCPA), which is broadly defined as:

“ A situation or an impending situation that constitutes a danger of major proportions that could result in serious harm to persons or substantial damage to property and that is caused by the forces of nature, a disease or other health risk, an accident or an act whether intentional or otherwise. ”

In such circumstances, the government may authorize (but not require) any person to provide services for which they are qualified. Such persons are expressly protected from termination during this period (unless for reasons unrelated to their absence to provide such services).

During the emergency, employees may request a leave of absence for the following specific reasons:

- Because they are the subject of an emergency order by the government under the EMCPA;
- Because they are the subject of an order by the government under the Health Protection and Promotion Act; or
- Because they are needed to provide care or assistance to defined relatives.

Once the emergency is over, the right to a protected leave ceases unless the government passes a regulation specifically providing that the time for leave is being extended because of the effects of the emergency and because of one of the foregoing reasons.

The OCC echoes the Ontario Medical Association in asking employers not to request sick notes or notes indicating health from physicians, as this will place a further strain on the health care system during a difficult time.

SUPPORTING YOUR EMPLOYEES

Simple steps can be taken by employers in order to help prevent employees from being infected with COVID-19 and spreading it to others, as well as supporting those whose lives have been disrupted by the pandemic.

Consider some of the following steps to assist your employees:

- Work from home, if applicable.
- Encourage good hygiene and workplace cleaning habits, i.e. have a supply of alcohol-based hand sanitizers stationed throughout your business.
- Share and post tips in your workplace on how to stop the spread of germs.
- Increase cleaning operations, particularly of common areas and frequently touched surfaces such as desks, phones, doorknobs and elevator buttons.
- Encourage employees to stay home and not work when they are sick and advise employees of the COVID-19 symptoms for which to monitor.
- Encourage employees to get a flu shot.
- Inform employees the Government of Canada has recommended to avoid any non-essential travel outside of Canada and they are required to self-isolate after returning from abroad. Note, while you may restrict business travel, an employer cannot restrict an employee's personal travel.
- Cancel work-related travel, particularly to areas in which infection rates are high or where a border may be closed.
- Have an infection control program that includes policies and procedures for prevention and containment.
- Implement social distancing measures, including:
 - Modifying the frequency and type of face-to-face employee encounters (e.g. placing moratoriums on handshaking, substituting teleconferences for face-to-face meetings, staggering breaks, staggering work hours to avoid crowds on public transit);
 - Establishing flexible work hours or worksites;
 - Promoting distancing between employees and customers to maintain 1 metre (3 feet) spatial separation between individuals.

Regulations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act must also be kept in mind in the event of a pandemic. Both the *Industrial Establishment Regulation* ([Regulation 851](#)) and the *Health Care and Residential Facilities Regulation* ([Regulation 67/93](#)) touch upon the threat to health and safety arising from biological agents and infectious disease.

Ministry of Labour guidelines are another potential source of emergency management guidance. For example, the Ministry of Labour has published guidelines on “[Workplace Exposure and Illnesses](#)”, “[Flu and Your Workplace](#)” and “[Infection Prevention and Control](#)”. Although they do not have the force of law, Ministry guidelines are a valid source of reference for attaining compliance with the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* as they are issued by the agency responsible for enforcing the Act.

You will also want to keep your employees up to date on the mitigation measures you are employing to both reassure them and to gain their buy-in for managing disruptions to the business. These measures include:

- Regular and consistent communication with your employees so they understand the severity of the pandemic and the preventative measures everyone should undertake.
- Regular and consistent communication regarding the steps your business is taking to prepare for/adapt to the pandemic including their expected roles.
- Development of a business continuity plan that is shared with employees. (See next section)

PREPARING A BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN

‘Business continuity’ means ensuring that essential business functions can survive a natural disaster, technological failure, human error, or other disruption. A pandemic demands a different set of continuity assumptions since it will be widely dispersed geographically and potentially arrive in waves that could last several months at a time.

What should be considered in a business continuity plan? The questions below will guide you in preparing your plan or taking the right action as a pandemic unfolds.

Business Continuity Plan Development

- Who has responsibility for activating the business continuity plan for your organization and who is that person’s back up?
- What is the process through which the decision will be made to activate and terminate the plan? (e.g. what triggers the plan and/or elements of the plan?)
- Do you have a communications strategy for reaching employees, clients, and supply chain partners as a result of having to implement any section of the plan?
- Who do you need input from both internally and externally to prepare and review a business continuity plan for your organization?
 - Elected officials
 - Legal counsel
 - Community partners
 - Labour unions and bargaining agents
- Who is in charge in the event of a pandemic episode and are the roles of the various stakeholders clearly defined? Who makes what decisions? Who notifies the various stakeholders?
- Is your pandemic plan integrated with your existing emergency preparedness plan(s)?
- Who needs to approve the plan?
- How will you test and/or evaluate your plan?
- Do you have a mechanism to periodically review and update your plan?

Decision-making and Reporting

- Who will be in charge and make decisions within your business concerning services during a pandemic/emergency episode?
- What will be the mechanism for regular reporting to your management staff/Boards/Government (whichever are appropriate for your organization) councils during a pandemic episode?
- Is there a contact list of all internal and external client and partner agencies, supply chain partners and stakeholders?

- Is there a contact list of all senior staff within your business?
- If public transportation became a problem, can employees arrange alternate forms of transportation to work?
- If necessary, could staff live at the work location or alternative work location for some period of time?
- Have you prepared site-specific notification for office closures and contacts for the public/clients?
- Does your business have a responsibility for the provision of services to the community during an emergency?
 - Provision of food or other supplies
 - Mass housing
 - Care for special needs people
 - Home care and childcare
- Have these services been planned for should there be a staff reduction due to absence?
- Who has signing authority for expenditures during an emergency and who is that person's back up?
- Are there clearly stated policies and procedures that cover signing authority and acquisitions?
- What is the staff capacity of your business and are there provisions to bring in additional staff and/or volunteers?
- Have alternative service providers been identified to assist with maintaining your essential services? What duties will they have and what additional training will they require? Have insurance coverage and union issues been addressed?
- What is the surge capacity of services delivered by your business?

Materials Management

- Are you currently stocked with all necessary supplies for regular day-to-day functions?
- Does your business have contact lists for all your suppliers and alternate suppliers?
- Does your business have access to inventory (including serial numbers) of all computer equipment, printers, mobile phones, photocopy machines, etc. in case repairs are needed?
- Does your business have contact lists for all equipment repair persons?
- Who authorizes repairs and supply/equipment orders? Are there other employees who can take over this responsibility in the event of an emergency?
- Has an inventory been prepared for specialized equipment/facilities that may be needed during a pandemic episode?
- Is there a mechanism that will ensure that additional equipment, e.g., mobile phones, broadband internet capacity, etc. can be obtained with minimum delay?
- Who has authority for ordering repair/replacement equipment and who is that person's back up?

Training

- What are the training needs pertaining to emergency and pandemic flu contingency plans for internal and external business partners/agencies? What additional training will be required?
- What orientation/education should be arranged for your employees to raise awareness about a pandemic emergency?
- Has staff been made aware of basic infection control guidelines to prevent the transmission of COVID-19?

Delivery of Services

- Have services in your business been prioritized to take into account minor to major staff absences due to illness?
- What is the role of your business with respect to assisting with service demands in health care facilities (i.e. hospitals, long-term care facilities, homes for special care) and has this plan been communicated to these facilities?
- Who will make decisions about reducing levels of service and/or cancelling services temporarily?
- Is there a pre-approval process in place for purchasing additional supplies?
- If not, how long does it take for approval to be granted?
- How will reduction/temporary cancellation of regular services be communicated to local clients, stakeholders, supply chain partners, the public and business partners?
- Could any of the business's services be provided from another work location?
- Have sites providing vulnerable services (such as long-term care homes, homes for special care) been identified and has the inventory of such services been shared with appropriate service providers?
 - o Patient transportation
 - o Patient assessment services
 - o Food services
 - o Equipment supply services (i.e. oxygen equipment)
- Has your business developed a list of skills and professional competencies of staff that are transferable to other business units, agency functions or for support to health care institutions in the community?
- Have support services been planned for workers, such as transportation, day-care, meals and grief counselling?
- Do you have a plan to replenish depleted supplies?

Human Resources

- Who in your organization has responsibility for collecting/ managing information about staff absenteeism?
Who is that person's back up?
- Do you have data on the average number of staff absences due to illness and vacation at different times of the year (monthly rates)?
- Is there a mechanism within your business to monitor and report increasing staff absenteeism due to illness to health authorities (e.g., Health and Safety Coordinator, Health Department)? An increase in staff absenteeism due to illness might be attributed to the spread of infections among co-workers suggesting an outbreak of disease.
- Is there flexibility in your absenteeism policies to address heightened absenteeism as a result of an outbreak, which will not negatively impact employees?
- Do you have policies or procedures to address your employees' psychological impacts resulting from an outbreak?
- Do you have policies or procedures to accommodate your employees' family obligations during an outbreak?
- Has your agency prepared an inventory of skills in the event that people from your business are required to perform duties/ functions in other business units/agencies to maintain essential services?
- Have liability issues been addressed for volunteers and reassigned staff members?
- Do you have a current list of staff complete with telephone numbers and emergency contact information? Has someone been assigned responsibility to ensure that it remains current?
- Do you have a current list of recently retired staff (complete with telephone numbers) who may be contacted in the event of extreme staff shortages?

- Do relevant employees have access to a list of all employees and relevant stakeholders?
- Is there a copy of the Health and Safety manual on site in your business?
- Who will be in charge of communicating to the employees in your business? Do you have backup person(s) to take on this responsibility? How will employees be contacted?
- Who will represent your business on community emergency response team(s), if requested to participate, and are there back-ups to those persons?
- Who will be responsible for payment issues related to overtime and/or additional salary issues? Are there staff designated as backup for these positions?
- In the event of a staff shortage, what roles/responsibilities could external contract workers and volunteers fill? What roles/responsibilities could co-workers fill?
- Who has the authority to hire contract/temporary workers and to take on volunteers? Is there a backup person for this job?
- Does your business have a system staff use to report absences due to illness and other reasons? Is this information accessible daily?
- How will you manage staff who have a higher health risk if exposed to COVID-19?

Record-Keeping

- Has your business developed appropriate record keeping procedures for items such as:
 - Staff absences
 - Vacation
 - Complaints and issues
- Do you have a plan to record significant decisions that were made during a pandemic?
- Is regular reporting to boards/government required?
- Have you safeguarded copies of your company's essential corporate records, such as:
 - Constitution, bylaws, charters, franchises and orders-in-council
 - Accounts payable and receivable
 - Bank and audit records
 - Capital and fixed assets records
 - Contracts and agreements
 - Licenses and permits
 - Leases, deeds, property and land files
 - Blueprints and technical drawings
 - Inventories
 - Mailing lists
 - Organization charts
 - Financial signing authorities
 - Union agreements
 - Software
 - Supplier listing
 - Insurance policies
 - Procedural manuals
 - Personnel records, payroll documents, pension fund files, salary deduction lists
 - Annual reports
 - Research, technical data and specifications on specialized projects
 - Special agreements with clients
 - Sales records and guarantees

Communication

- Have you developed internal and external pandemic communications plans? (see [here](#) for the Canadian Chamber of Commerce's adapted crisis communication plan)
- In your organization, who has primary responsibility for communicating with the public/business partners/supply chain partners/staff? Who is that person's back up if this person is ill?
- Are there people in your organization who have sole access to incoming information, e.g., business information, incidence reports, complaints etc.? If so, have you arranged for designates to receive this information?
- Does your organization maintain a central inventory of passwords to office equipment and electronic files? Is there a designate for the person who has responsibility for the inventory?
- If your information technology lead is ill, to whom can you turn if you experience computer problems?
- How does your staff communicate with each other during office hours and after-office hours? Is there an alternate form of communication they can rely on?
- Who are your security contacts should there be a problem with physical access to your work location and is there a back up to your security contacts?
- If mail service is interrupted, are there critical items you need to receive or deliver that you will need alternative arrangements for?
- Does your organization send out time-sensitive letters or documents and is there a back-up system for these?
- How are courier packages generally received and sent out?
- How will you send out public service announcements and news releases?
- Will employees and the public be able to access a website or telephone number to get updates on service delivery news?

Recovery

- What are the immediate lessons learned?
- Who will have the authority to notify the various employees, clients, and stakeholders regarding reinstating services and finally return to full service?
- Who will be responsible for evaluating your local response?
- What factors should be examined as part of the evaluation?
- Have any health (including mental health) needs for staff been provided for?

This list may seem overwhelming. To help get you started, BDC has created business continuity plan templates, which can be found [here](#).

FURTHER RESOURCES

In the event of an emergency, contact your local Public Health Unit. [Public Health Ontario](#) and local Public Health Units are monitoring the COVID-19 outbreak and can provide advice and direction regarding steps to be taken by individuals experiencing symptoms or who fear they have contracted the illness. The Medical Officer of Health is responsible for critical services governed by the Board of Health in each local Health Unit. He or she is endowed with broad powers under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act* and these may impact on your business and employees.

Your local public health units will have released pandemic plans for their communities. Some of the plans contain information dedicated to the business community, including helpful tools and suggestions.

Also consider consulting the following resources to assist with your planning and deployment efforts:

Government

The [Ontario Ministry of Health website](#) contains information on the COVID-19 pandemic including the current status of the outbreak. See also the [Ministry of Labour](#) for workplace health and safety information.

The Public Health Agency of Canada has a [dedicated page for the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

The [World Health Organization website](#) provides up-to-date information on the spread of the pandemic.

Other resources

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce has prepared a [pandemic toolkit](#).

The Calgary Chamber of Commerce has adapted their [award-winning emergency preparedness toolkit](#) for COVID-19.

The Ontario Medical Association has developed an FAQ about the coronavirus and personal health at [virusfacts.ca](#).

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety has a general [Business Continuity Plan for pandemics](#).

Workplace Safety & Prevention Services has a [Business Pandemic Preparedness Checklist](#).

Stay up to date with current COVID-19 news and resources at [occ.ca](#).



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