

## **COVID Vaccine Role Out Should be Based on Needs vs Location**

**By Brian Dunne, Executive Director PHSS**

The COVID-19 vaccine is a key tool in our fight to contain this global pandemic. With numbers continuing to rise in communities across Ontario, it's critical our most vulnerable residents, and the staff who support them, are at the front of the line to receive the vaccine.

Sadly, this is not happening.

Despite the fact our organization provides essential healthcare to a highly vulnerable population, neither our staff, nor the individuals we support, are scheduled to get the COVID vaccine in this first wave, or potentially until the fall.

Why? Because the Ontario government is not allocating vaccines based on the needs of vulnerable populations but is making decisions based on institutional categories. This approach doesn't take into account the medical needs and risk factors of individuals living in community settings – such as PHSS or Community Living residential homes.

For example, recent studies have shown that individuals with Down Syndrome are at a greater risk of becoming severely ill if they contract COVID. They are 10 times more likely to die and 5 times more likely to be hospitalized. Add this to the fact these individuals are around 10 years younger than the average hospitalized COVID patient, and you can see why it's so important they receive the vaccine in the first wave.

Yet despite the known risks for individuals with medical and complex needs as well as those with developmental disabilities, unless they live in a long-term care home or hospital setting, they are not prioritized to receive the vaccine.

The consequences of not vaccinating staff and the people we support in the first wave could be unnecessary illness and even death for thousands of Ontarians, putting tremendous strain on the healthcare system. A strain that is easily avoided by providing early access to COVID vaccines.

### **In community care**

For those not familiar with the work of PHSS, we provide medical and complex care to about 300 individuals with complex medical needs in 60 small-scale homes that we operate across Southern Ontario and Ottawa. Through the care they receive, severely frail individuals and individuals with developmental disabilities are able to live in community – which helps keep them safe, reduces healthcare costs and adds to their quality of life.

Without PHSS, many of these individuals would live in the ICU or a hospital setting, due to the complexity of their medical needs. This includes their ongoing dependence on ventilators, other clinical devices and treatments, and receiving 24/7 personal care support. Yet if they did live in a hospital setting, they would be given the vaccine during the first wave of administration.

**Priority population**

Despite the fact many of our residents would suffer severe health complications if they contracted COVID, individuals with acute medical needs are not on the radar of the Ontario government as being a priority population.

At PHSS, we have made a commitment to keep our residents at home, safe and in the community. The only way we can keep this commitment is to vaccinate the individuals we support and our staff to protect them against COVID.

Even if the Province of Ontario abandons this population, we will not.

We are asking the Ontario government to do the right thing – include severely frail residents and individuals with developmental disabilities, as well as the staff who support them, in the first wave of vaccinations. Regardless of the setting in which they work or live.

This means moving from prioritizing institutions to identifying high-risk sub groups when determining the vaccine rollout.

By doing so, the government will help protect these vulnerable individuals and ensure we can continue to support them in community versus in the hospital.