

**Opening statement**

**of**

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**Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs,  
Science and Technology**

**Public Health Agency's response to COVID-19**

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Check Against Delivery**

## ***Introduction***

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

Thank you for inviting us here today to provide an overview of the Government of Canada's response regarding public health and COVID-19.

I want to begin by assuring the Committee members that our number one priority is the health and safety of Canadians.

COVID-19 continues to pose a serious threat to global health, and the situation is changing day by day. The risk varies between communities in Canada, but given the number of cases in Canada and the presence of community transmission in some areas, the risk to Canadians is deemed high.

There are currently more than xxxxx confirmed cases of COVID-19, including more than xxxx deaths. In addition, Canada recently completed its one millionth COVID-19 test.

To date, our efforts have been aimed at flattening the curve. We continue to focus on lowering the overall number of cases of illness and death from COVID-19 by reducing transmission through public health measures, as well as reducing the social impact of this rapidly evolving and unprecedented global public health issue.

We are making clear progress in slowing down the spread of the disease and controlling the epidemic. The growth

rate for new cases has slowed down considerably over the past two months. However, we must continue to be vigilant. We are continuing to adjust our response as our knowledge about the virus improves, prepare for possible future waves, and plan for the recovery phase.

I would like to take a moment to describe some of the key public health measures taken by the Government of Canada in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Early intervention**

Timely information gathered in cooperation with our national and international partners enabled the Government of Canada, the provinces and territories to act quickly and in a coordinated manner prior to the first suspected case of COVID-19 on January 25.

We moved quickly to mobilize Canada's public health emergency response infrastructure as new information became available, and the risk to the health and safety of Canadians became more evident. This included the activation of the *Federal/Provincial/Territorial Public Health Response Plan for Biological Incidents* and the establishment of the *F/P/T Special Advisory Committee*.

From early February, we implemented a series of Interim Orders under the *Quarantine Act* to strengthen border measures and limit entry into Canada from abroad, including from the United States.

These Interim Orders were continually reviewed as new information on COVID-19 became available. For example, based on new evidence concerning asymptomatic transmission, all people entering Canada, with few exceptions, are now required to quarantine themselves for a period of 14 days.

## ***Screening***

COVID-19 testing and confirmation of cases are key components in the response efforts. The National Microbiology Laboratory was able to quickly develop a diagnostic test when the genetic sequence of the virus was published in January.

The Agency and the NML are working closely with provincial and territorial public health laboratories through the Canadian Public Health Laboratory Network to provide screening services. Today, more than 30 laboratories across Canada can perform confirmatory testing. This network also evaluates new diagnostic tests, such as rapid point-of-care tests, as soon as they become available. We are also working with our provincial and territorial partners to update laboratory testing guidelines every time our understanding of the virus improves.

## ***Personal protective equipment***

Another important area of interest has been the procurement of essential personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical equipment for front-line health care workers. We do this through collaborative procurement of batches with the provinces and territories, building national production capacity, and identifying potential alternatives and ways of extending product life.

The Public Health Agency of Canada also deploys PPE and fans from its National Emergency Strategic Stockpile System in response to urgent provincial and territorial requests.

## ***Communicating with Canadians***

Providing Canadians with reliable and accurate information and advice as the COVID-19 situation evolves has been a major part of the Government of Canada's response.

Our messages have consistently emphasized the importance of changing our behaviours to reduce the spread of COVID-19, including staying home when sick, washing our hands and practising social distancing.

Canadians can access the Public Health Agency's website on COVID-19 or call the toll-free information line. In

addition, we have set up a national education campaign for COVID-19.

### ***Vaccines and therapeutic products***

Currently, there is no vaccine for COVID-19. Research and development activities for COVID-19 vaccines or therapeutic treatments are at varying stages around the world, including in Canada. We will continue to work with the international community.

In March, the Government of Canada announced a \$1 billion COVID-19 Response Fund, which includes \$275 billion to strengthen our capacity for testing antivirals, developing vaccines and supporting clinical trials.

### ***Emergence of Public Health Measures***

At the national level, we have seen the impact of public health measures on flattening the epidemic curve and slowing the growth in new case numbers.

The doubling rate of cases has slowed from every three days at the end of March to over 20 days at this time. We have also increased our testing capacity to an average of 28,000 tests per day; this number continues to grow.

However, until targeted therapies or a vaccine are available, our goal must be to find the right balance between the risks associated with the spread of COVID-19 and the health, social and economic consequences of the virus.

Many Canadians, as well as many businesses, are eager to see public health measures lifted so that life and routines can get back to a “new normal”.

With this in mind, we have been working with our provincial and territorial partners across Canada to develop a shared approach for guiding the decision-making process regarding the lifting of public health measures. This approach is based on common objectives, principles, criteria and indicators to determine whether measures can be lifted or whether to adjust the restrictive measures. We recognize that there may be regional differences, and that governments will make decisions appropriate for their jurisdictions, geography and level of disease activity.

### ***Immediate and future challenges***

Before closing, I would like to touch on some of the challenges we face.

We remain concerned about outbreaks of the disease in vulnerable populations, including in long-term care and

correctional facilities. We are continuing to work with provincial, territorial and local public health authorities by providing advice and support in these facilities.

We are also aware of the importance of protecting remote and isolated First Nations communities, both in terms of prevention of transmission and of the ability to respond quickly and effectively should the need arise.

Lastly, looking beyond the summer and a possible resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall, coinciding with the flu season, we are preparing to meet this potential dual public health challenge.

### ***Conclusion***

I would be happy to answer your questions.