

**TRANSCRIPTION
BRIEFING**

Transcription prepared by Media Q Inc. exclusively for Public Health Agency of Canada

DATE: March 28, 2020 4:30 p.m. ET

LOCATION: Teleconference

PRINCIPALS: Cindy Evans, Public Health Agency of Canada, Covid 19
Emergency Manager

SUBJECT: The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) holds a daily COVID-19 technical briefing for Parliamentarians.

Moderator: Good afternoon and welcome to the technical briefing to Parliamentarians on the government's response to Covid 19. Joining us today are the following departments and agencies: Employment and Social Development Canada, Global Affairs Canada, Canada Border Services Agency, Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, Canada Revenue Agency, Indigenous Services Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Innovation Science and Economic Development Canada, Public Safety and Transport Canada, Public Service and Procurement Canada.

Please note callers will be permitted one question. We ask that you keep the question to 60 seconds as there are many callers on the line who wish to have a chance to ask their question.

Please identify yourself and inform us which riding you represent. I would like to turn the meeting over to Ms. Cindy Evans, the Public Health Agency of Canada's Covid 19 emergency manager. The line is yours Ms. Evans.

I would like to open the floor to Cindy Evans, Manager of Covid 19 Emergencies at the Public Health Agency of Canada. You have the floor, Ms. Evans.

Cindy Evans: Good afternoon everyone, bon après-midi. Dr. Tam announced today globally there are over 600,000 cases of Covid 19 in Canada and as well there are 5,150 – sorry in Canada there are 5,153 cases, 55 deaths and 184,000 people have been tested.

That sets the context for our conversation today and with that I'd like to welcome people to our technical briefing today. We will open it up for questions.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, if you have a question please press *1 on your telephone. The first question is from Tracy Gray. Please go ahead.

Tracy Gray: Good morning. This is Tracy Gray from Kelowna Lake Country. My question is regarding getting updated announcements on government websites. What we see happening is in the morning the Prime Minister will make an

announcement about different activities for small business or with the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit or other announcements.

Then immediately our constituency offices start getting phone calls and hundreds of emails asking about the announcements. It would be great if we could refer them to the government website and email people back saying here's where you go to look. What we have right now is even as an example there were announcements made and as of today we don't have information that's updated on the government websites.

It creates a lot more work for us having to go back to people and also the general public where you're saying there's nowhere you can go look about this information. I'm wondering if I can put that out there and ask. In addition to that regarding the CERB I know there will be a portal so that people can apply through CRA.

Even if that portal isn't active yet, if we know what the link is we could start giving it to people now even if the website says it will be active as of April 6th or whatever the date is. It will create a lot less going back and forth with people. Thank you.

Cindy Evans: Thanks very much for your question. As I'm sure you can imagine government of Canada are trying to work as quickly as we can and be responsive to the Covid 19 situation in Canada as it evolves. We'll take your suggestion back to our numerous colleagues around the federal government that are working on updating our websites as quickly as possible.

We do have our CRA colleagues are on the phone and can take under advisement your suggestion to share the linkage. I would expect we don't want to create any confusion by people thinking the link doesn't work by sending it out too early but I would leave that to my colleagues at CRA. Thank you.

Unidentified Male, CRA: This is (unintelligible) with the Canada Revenue Agency. With respect to the applications that the CRA will be processing the portal through which we will be running, it is open and available right now. It's just not ready to take in applications. It is the CRA My Account so our constituents would be able to visit it or register for it or make sure their address and direct deposit information is correct so that when we are able to take applications all those steps will have been completed.

Operator: The next question is from someone we are unable to get their name. Caller, please state your name and go ahead with your question. Your line is now open.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's Pierre Poilievre. Thank you very much. My question is about employment insurance, the traditional employment insurance recipients who are not especially affected by Covid 19 but who need EI for other traditional normal reasons. Would anything change – tell me about what changes they would experience in trying to apply for and receive the benefit that they would normally get otherwise.

Cindy Evans: I'll turn to my colleague at ESDC.

Alisha Ram: Good afternoon. This is Alisha Ram (ph) from ESDC. Thank you for the question. The plan is applicants who apply for EI regular benefits and EI sickness benefits will be processed through a new more simplified system that will allow us to deal with the volume that we're experiencing and still be able to get resources to people in a reasonable amount of time.

People who are receiving other types of EI benefits including parental and maternity, EI fishing benefit, or caregiver benefit will experience absolutely no change. They will continue to apply the way they've always applied and we'll process through the current EI system.

Operator: The next question is from Kim Pate. Please go ahead.

Senator Pate: Thank you very much and thank you again for these briefings. I'm concerned as all of us are around individuals who are not self-distancing and creating the physical space. I'm though also extremely concerned to hear the push that's starting to – some of the language that's starting to be used around punishment and arrests.

And that sort of thing particularly in light of the research that the Department of Justice itself has done around the ineffectiveness of such approaches, of using punishment to try and deter people and rather the value of public education and peer pressure to achieve those results.

Given that we know many of the individuals who are acting as though they're immune to this are young people I'm wondering what efforts are being made to engage young people to develop some of the education tools that might benefit all of us obviously ultimately to try and get through to young people and to others who may be avoiding self-distancing.

Cindy Evans: Thank you very much for your question. You're raising a really important point. With respect to compliance of the measures we would agree with you that education and information is an important part of that approach.

At our borders an important part of the interactions we have with travelers for example is to make sure they have the information they need, sharing both instructions for how to best protect themselves, their families and their communities.

One of the other things we have done recently is on the Public Health Agency of Canada website is put more information up about cases in Canada and their spread so people can see it's not something happening in a far-off land. They can have a better sense of what's happening close to home.

Then as well the demographics of the disease, we do know that seniors and those of advanced age are more vulnerable but the cases are not limited to that. The Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Tam has been quite clear in her messaging that anyone can be at risk of this.

What we will also be looking to do is better unpack for Canadians so they can see those who have been hit by unfortunately severe illness or hospitalization, to share more information in terms of the age demographics that are affected. I appreciate your question and I think we need to continue our efforts both in multi modes to get information out for transparency. Thank you.

Operator: The next question is from Rachel Blaney. Please go ahead.

Rachel Blaney: Hello everybody and thank you again for these. They're very informative. I have a question about seniors. Right now we're having some seniors in our constituency who have lost their job because of Covid 19 and they're receiving partial GIS and they're supplementing their income through working 12 hours a week. Now they've lost that work. Their GIS won't be increased because the tax filing deadline has been extended. I'm wondering if they would be eligible for CERB.

Cindy Evans: Thank you very much for your question. I'll turn to my colleague at ESDC.

Alisha Ram: Hi, I'm from ESDC. Thank you for your question. We are still finalizing the design parameters of the CERB. However the policy intent as expressed by the government is fairly clear which is that we are looking to cover people who have stopped working as a result of COVID and have the ability to declare they've got at least \$5,000 income over the last 12 months or in 2019. A person who meets those criteria is certainly eligible regardless of their age as long as they're over 15.

Operator: The next question is from Laurel Collins. Please go ahead.

Laurel Collins: I actually have a very similar question to Rachel Blaney. I'm hoping for some clarification from the last answer as well. For people who – I asked this in the last briefing and there wasn't – the person mentioned they would go back and try and get some information about people who are receiving disability assistance, who were able to work and earn \$1,000 a month.

They have lost that ability because of Covid 19, they lost that income, wondering if they are able to apply for CERB and just trying to figure out also for people who might have been contract workers who are in the gig economy. They have lost the vast majority of their contracts.

Maybe they only have about 10% of their income now, if they are able to apply for CERB. If you don't have a concrete answer maybe also we can expect the details of who will be eligible, seniors who are receiving GIS and OAS, people on disability who are receiving disability assistance and people in the gig economy who have lost the vast majority of their income.

Cindy Evans: Thank you for your question. I'll turn to my colleague at ESDC.

Alisha Ram: Thank you. As I mentioned we are working very hard and very quickly to finalize all of those design parameters. Obviously there are people in a variety of different circumstances and it's very difficult to say specifically whether a person in a particular circumstance would qualify.

We very much hope in the coming days to be able to make public the actual design parameters. Many of those questions will be answered at that time. We appreciate there's a lot of interest and people naturally want to know whether they're going to be covered. We're doing everything possible to get that clarity out to people as soon as we can.

Operator: The next question is from Alistair MacGregor. Please go ahead.

Alistair MacGregor: Hi everyone, Alistair MacGregor from the riding of Cowichan Malahat Langford. The previous answer to EI was very close to mine. I have a constituent who is looking to apply for maternity benefits in about 3 to 4 months but is worried her job may be shut down in the next couple of weeks.

She's worried that she won't have enough hours to qualify for applying for maternity benefits. If you could give a quick overview of that but my main question was regarding the city of Vancouver's announcement on the safe supply of drugs for drug users who are going through the Covid 19 crisis.

My community is also going through the opioids crisis while we're dealing with Covid 19. I'm curious what kind of federal authorization was given to the city of Vancouver to go through with this program and if we have other communities in British Columbia like mine that are also dealing with the same problem, how would we go about seeking the same kind of authorization from the federal government?

Cindy Evans: Could we start with ESDC regarding the maternity benefit question?

Alisha Ram: Certainly and I can appreciate the anxiety of a person who is currently working but is worried their employment will not continue and they will not be able to have the hours they need to qualify. The policy regarding maternal and parental benefits remains as it was in the key respect of requiring 600 hours of

insurable employment to qualify. As things stand today that policy unfortunately has not changed.

Cindy Evans: With respect to the second part of the question I'm not in a position to comment on the decision regarding the specific safe supply site. That's something we would invite other colleagues to the table to address that type of question. We can raise it in our ongoing federal provincial territorial discussions. We'll take the next question please.

Operator: The next question is from Mike Lake. Please go ahead.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you for that. I'm taking a look at these numbers. Before I go into the numbers I want to give kudos to the folks at Global Affairs Canada. I've been working with some 13 constituents in South Africa and had some great conversations in the middle of the night to get some clarity around their situation. I appreciate that.

I'm going to go back to what I've been talking about the last while. I just got off the phone with my doctor and did test negative so found that out today but I don't want that to take away from the fact that the time that it took to get that test result back given that under the circumstances there was a reasonable relative likelihood I could have it and being an MP I have a high potential for spreading.

The fact that my last contact with David Beasley was March 12th and today is March 28th, 16 days later by the time I got the notification of the results of my test. I still say that's too long. I noticed the numbers for testing are going up but I think we're nowhere near where we need to be overall.

And when I look at the numbers if I'm reading it correctly the number of cases in Canada went up 27.5% since our briefing yesterday and the number of tests only went up 12%. I hope I'm reading that correctly. I want to know and I'm going to keep pressing this, what is the ultimate goal for testing?

Is our goal to test everybody in the country at some point in time so we have a definitive answer as to whether or not everybody has it and we can make really good decisions regarding tracing and treatment and prevention.

Whatever that ultimate goal is what are the biggest blockages that we need to be aware of? Every situation, everything that everybody is talking about on this call will be resolved or mitigated to some extent if we can get a handle on testing, tracing and treatment.

Cindy Evans: Thank you very much for your question. This is a really important issue in terms of our management of the Covid 19. I would like to say that this topic is part of our ongoing conversations with the special advisory committee

which is a committee that our Chief Public Health Officer holds with the Chief Medical Officers of Health in each of the provinces.

One of the clear things that is being done is to prioritize the testing. We need to make sure for example first responders and healthcare workers are being tested quickly. The intention is not to test everyone in Canada. The other thing is for people that are asymptomatic there's no priority for testing those because the information wouldn't be value added in terms of telling us how we would act on that.

A number of steps have been taken to increase the sites that are available to do testing. There's been ongoing work through our national microbial lab in terms of providing guidance and as well we work with the Canadian Public Health lab directors across Canada. I will say in terms of the testing numbers Canada's testing numbers per capita are quite strong when we compare to others in the world.

Again this is something we continue to prioritize. The discussions at our FPT table are intended to make sure we have a coherent approach because that's also an important part of interpreting how we're doing with respect to the outbreak in Canada to make sure we have consistency in testing. Thank you. We'll take the next question please.

Operator: The next question is from Pierre Vanier. Please go ahead.

Pierre Vanier: Hello, Pierre Vanier, Political Advisor to Luc Thériault in Montcalm. A question about access to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit for self-employed workers who own a company, who are incorporated and who don't get a salary but receive dividends from their business. Are these people eligible for the CERB?

Cindy Evans: Thank you for your question. Employment and Social Development Canada, please.

Operator: The next question is from Diane Griffin. Please go ahead.

Senator Griffin: This is Diane Griffin. I'm one of the four Senators from Prince Edward Island. My question relates to the ferry boats. As you know there's a number of ferries here in eastern Canada including Quebec and the four Atlantic provinces. By the way I applaud the Prime Minister today for banning people from VIA Rail and from flying who show symptoms of the virus or symptoms of illness.

I'm wondering what about the ferry boats? It's really important that our essential workers, namely the truckers, don't get exposed. Today in consultation with Ferries Canada I've learned that they cannot deny boarding to anyone if that person is sick. We've got a problem here. Why is the federal government allowing this risk for the essential workers, namely the truckers to be exposed on the ferry boats?

Cindy Evans: Thank you for your question. Before I turn to my colleague at Transport for that answer we did have a previous question for ESDC that somehow got skipped over. I just wanted to check in. Alisha Ram, are you able to provide some input to the question that was asked?

We must have lost him on the line. Apologies for that and we will look to follow up on the question that was asked. With that I'll turn to my colleague at Transport to address the questions related to the federal role especially including the concerns raised from ferry boats.

Erin McCrory, Transport: Thank you. It's Erin McCrory (ph) here from Transport Canada and thank you for the question. We've been doing a lot of work in all the modes of transportation to help limit the spread of Covid 19 but also at the same time to make sure as you point out that necessary transport continues.

When we looked at the marine sector which is very much an extension of the road or highway system most people are traveling in personal vehicles. There's more space available on a ferry than you would typically see on a rail car or a passenger vehicle. We recently provided a short term exemption to some of our existing rules to allow people to stay in their vehicles below deck.

We've completely not allowed that in the past but we're allowing it now to promote that social distancing for the very reason you pointed out and we continue to look at what different ferry operators are doing and what can be done moving forward to address any issues that may emerge in the ferry sector.

I would also add we've been sharing lots of guidance with all transportation modes so they can properly manage, clean and manage their operations safely in this environment, clean their means of conveyance. I would also note on the marine side that we deferred the start of cruise ship season in Canada until the end of June because of concerns, the unique concerns presented by cruise ships.

Operator: The next question is from Senator Bernard. Please go ahead.

Senator Bernard: Thank you very much. I'm from Nova Scotia. I have two questions I'm going to try to link. One of these things that many people have been contacting me about and we've asked – I know Senator Pate is on the line and has asked this previously but we're still looking for a national strategy to address the potential for significant spread of the virus in Canada's federal prisons.

Staff in those prisons are in and out and the prisoners are trapped and feeling quite worried about the lack of attention to their concerns. I'm also hearing from a number of people how equity issues are embedded in a lot of the processes that are put in place --

that are being put in place to address the virus without enough attention being paid to how people are impacted differently.

One of the examples was around education and the move that many provinces are taking for example to online education but there are so families who are living in poverty who don't have access to online, whose access would have been public libraries who no longer have that access.

There's such an over representation of people of African descent in both those groups that I've identified. I'm really looking for what updates we have and also what commitment is there to ensure that the equity issue got taken into account when decisions are being made.

Cindy Evans: Thank you very much for your question. With respect to the approach for education and the public health measures that provinces have taken I'm not in a position to speak to that.

One of the things we have done at the FPT table that Public Health Agency of Canada hosts is to make sure we're collecting and are aware of the public health measures that have been taken at each of the jurisdictions so we can be aware of clarity and look at the consistency.

Certainly the school closures have been an important part of preventing the spread and allowing for social distancing and self-isolation. The first part of your question was with respect to potential for spread in the prisons. We do not have Correctional Services with us today but I'll check if my colleague from Public Safety has anything he could add to that question.

Craig Rolland, PSEP: Hi there. It's Craig Rolland (ph) here from Public Safety Canada. I'm sorry that's not my area of expertise so I won't be able to respond to your question but I will take it and try to connect with Correctional Services and see if we can get something back for you.

Cindy Evans: Thank you. Next question please.

Operator: The next question is from Michelle Garner. Please go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Garner: Hi thank you. I was looking for some more clarity with regards to the announcement made today around some of the new domestic travel restrictions. My understanding is there will be a health questionnaire that travelers have to fill out and that somebody is going to be screening people for symptoms.

I'm wondering what that looks like. Who is undertaking that screening? Are you taking temperatures? Are you training airline employees to do this? How are you tracking whether or not this is successful?

Cindy Evans:
at Transport Canada.

Thank you for your question. I'll turn to my colleague

Erin McCrory, Transport: Thank you for the question. Starting on March 30th at 12:00 for both federally regulated railways and all domestic and outbound flights leaving from Canadian airports we're going to be doing two things. One is we're asking the operators to notify all passengers that they should be checking upon arrival with the specific measures that different provinces and territories are putting in place and to comply with that.

In addition we're asking the operators to conduct basic healthcare checks based on guidance we've got from the experts at the Public Health Agency of Canada. They're being asked a series of four questions. They're being asked if they have a fever and a cough. If yes they're to be denied boarding.

They're asked if they have fever and difficulty breathing, if yes they're denied boarding. We also asked if they've been refused boarding in the last 14 days for a medical reason related to Covid 19. If the answer is yes they're to be denied boarding. They're reminded and then asked if they're subject to any provincial or local public health orders.

Part of the reason for the delay from the announcement to the implementation is so that the railways and the air operators be properly prepared to implement this at noon on Monday.

Cindy Evans: Thank you very much. With respect to the part of the question of how we will track success, an important work that is done in the provinces is the case and contact tracing. Part of that is determining what was the nature of the potential exposure for the case and so that's one way we can look to is a case being spread in the community. Is it related to travel? It's an opportunity for us to look at the success of these measures. Next question please.

Operator: The next question is from Mel Arnold. Please go ahead.

Mel Arnold: Good afternoon, thank you for these ongoing calls. They're very informative. One question I have had from a constituent that has a son in a correctional facility in the US and they're being told the US correctional facilities don't have the capacity should the Covid situation develop out there.

The person has been approved for a transfer program back to Canada by the US but not done in Canada yet. Is there any process to move this through right now so I can provide some answers back to my constituent?

Cindy Evans: Thank you for your question. I'll turn to my colleague at GAC. Is there some response you could provide?

Unidentified Female: I think that in terms of the specific case it's probably better if you reach out to us through consular operations so I can, we can touch base after this call. What is happening in some countries is that there are in some cases amnesties or release of non-violent prisoners because of Covid outbreaks to try and reduce crowding in foreign prisons.

In the case of the US this isn't happening but it sounds like your constituent's son is already part of a process. We would have to follow up with our embassy in Washington with the specific details.

I'm not sure what the best way is for you to be in touch but through the office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs they'll be able to reach through to our consular operations and they would be able to provide the details of the case and we could reach out through our embassy in Washington.

Mel Arnold: Okay, that's Minister of Foreign Affairs not Minister of Public Safety or anything like that?

Unidentified Female: Yeah, I think in the first instance we can find out the details of the case and where it stands. It may well be the Minister of Public Safety that holds the key but we can make that connection for you.

Operator: The next question is from someone whose name we're unable to get. Caller please state your name and go ahead with your question. Your line is now open. We are not hearing any response. If you are using a speaker phone would you be kind enough to pick up the handset or mute your line? We are still not hearing any response. We will proceed to the next caller.

Moderator: We have time for one more question.

Operator: Certainly. The next question is from Ruby Sahota. Please go ahead.

Ruby Sahota: Thank you for taking my question. My question is regarding OAS and GIS. Currently we have many seniors that are snowbirds that are stuck overseas. They have very little flight options and in some cases they have no flight options because there's complete lockdown of the country they're in.

I would guesstimate for India for example there may be 40,000 to 50,000 people that are PR and citizens that are there, many of them seniors. If they go under the policy we have in place today if they're out of the country for more than six months they lose payments to OAS and GIS. Would an exception be made in this case and if so do they have to provide something upon return or is it just automatically done?

Cindy Evans: Thank you. I'm not sure. We might have lost our colleague from ESDC on the line. ESDC are you able to provide any response to this question? We've been having some challenges with our teleconference line. Global Affairs Canada, is there any input you would have on this question?

Unidentified Female: Not on this specific question of what happens back in Canada unfortunately. We are working as I mentioned yesterday to be able to confirm this week flights back to Canada. Obviously it's not all citizens at once that are going to be able to avail themselves of those flights but we are working very hard to provide opportunities. In terms of the specific question in regards to insurance back in Canada unfortunately that's outside my area of expertise.

Cindy Evans: Thank you. With that we are going to close off the call today. I'd really like to thank everyone for participating and the efforts of all Parliamentarians to share the messages from Dr. Tam encouraging social distancing and self-isolation. We're hoping to be able as BC has done with some cautious optimism be able to encourage Canadians to keep this up so that we can best situate Canada in the Covid 19 response. Thank you very much.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, your conference has now ended. Please disconnect your lines at this time. Thank you for your participation.