

ISSUE NOTE: Indigenous Implications of COVID-19 Response in Remote and Isolated Communities

BACKGROUND

Remote and isolated communities experience increased health inequalities compared to the rest of Canada due to ongoing issues related to social determinants of health, including high rates of overcrowding, water and food security challenges, distance from health care facilities and shortage of PPE. These factors result in increased risk of chronic illness and disease, making residents of remote and isolated communities more susceptible to severe health issues if they contract COVID.

There is no definition of what makes a community remote and isolated. Some common characteristics may include: smaller populations, limited access by land, or eligibility under certain federal programs (e.g. Nutrition North Canada). Additionally, many remote and isolated communities often include a higher proportion of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Metis individuals.

Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) is the federal lead for providing health services to Indigenous Peoples on reserve and in Inuit Nunangat. Indigenous people residing in remote and isolated communities not served by ISC are eligible to receive health services from provincial or territorial governments.

PHAC CONSIDERATIONS

- PHAC is a member of the Remote and Isolated Communities Working Group under the Special Advisory Committee that was convened as part of Canada's response to COVID-19. The Working Group was convened to share information, develop guidance documents and tools and provide support to territorial and Indigenous governments on the pandemic response in remote and isolated communities. The Working Group discusses issues including safe and effective access to quality emergency health preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery services in response to COVID-19. The Working Group has a specific mandate to help address the emerging needs and priorities of First Nations and Métis populations and develop tailored guidelines in response to COVID-19¹.
- PHAC's Regional Operations Northern Unit plays a role in supporting remote and isolated communities' capacity regarding emergency preparedness and response. The Northern Unit supports operational engagements at the community level related to emergency preparedness and response with the territorial governments, various federal departments (including Indigenous Services Canada and Public Safety Canada), and community-based stakeholders to streamline federal response to territorial needs and coordinate appropriate federal support in the North.
- Access to health services is a key determinant of health that affects remote and isolated communities. Many of these communities lack the capacity to deal with community-wide health emergencies and rely on transportation to larger urban areas. PHAC supports the development of local public health capacity through the Canadian Public Health Service and the

¹ Terms of Reference, Public Health Working Group on Remote and Isolated

placement of public health officers in jurisdictions to build public health capacity with a focus on Indigenous health. Recent placements have included communities in all three Territories, Manitoba, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan.

- PHAC is a member of the Ad Hoc DM Committee on the Arctic which is overseeing the co-implementation of the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF) with provincial, territorial and Indigenous partners. The first phase of implementing the ANPF is the co-development of a regional governance mechanism and long-term investment strategy. The investment strategy may be an opportunity for PHAC to secure additional resources to help improve public health capacity in northern, remote, isolated and Indigenous communities.

KEY MESSAGES

- PHAC engages with Indigenous leaders representing remote and isolated communities through its participation in the Remote and Isolated Communities Working Group that was created under the Special Advisory Committee structure as part of Canada's response to COVID-19.
- As part of PHAC's emergency response efforts under Canada's response to COVID-19, PHAC supports Indigenous Peoples in remote and isolated communities by working with provincial and territorial governments to manage the allocation formula for PPE, coordinating the access to testing and by providing lab support through the National Microbiology Laboratory.
- In addition to its emergency response efforts, PHAC supports the development of Indigenous public health capacity in remote and isolated communities through the Canadian Public Health Service and the Canadian Field Epidemiological Program. Through these programs, PHAC places public health officers and field epidemiologists in communities to build public health capacity and to provide specialized training for public health professionals.