



## **Applying a Health Equity Lens to Municipal Economic Recovery**

As we move through Stage 3 of Ontario's reopening of the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, municipalities continue to plan for the economic recovery of their communities. There is evidence mounting that the COVID-19 community-based public health measures have disproportionately impacted people already experiencing health inequities. As such, it is important for all levels of government to apply a health equity lens when planning for economic recovery in order to help mitigate these negative impacts as we transition to a "new normal".

### **Key Messages**

- Populations\* that experience health inequities have been more susceptible to the negative impacts of the community-based public health measures† implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Applying a health equity lens to municipal economic recovery plans can help mitigate these negative impacts and reduce health inequities.
- There are a number of ways that municipalities in Simcoe Muskoka have already considered health equity in their responses to COVID-19 that could be continued and/or expanded upon as they develop and implement plans for economic recovery.
- Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) can support municipalities to integrate a health equity lens into their plans for economic recovery.

### **What is health equity?**

Health equity means that all members of our communities, regardless of race, age, income, culture, or education, have equal opportunities to be healthy.<sup>3</sup> This recognizes that some groups of people face additional barriers to achieving optimal well-being due to a variety of factors that are outside of their control.<sup>4</sup> In fact, health inequities, such as food insecurity (inadequate access to food due to financial constraints), are often the root causes of poor health and have been linked to higher levels of chronic disease, poorer levels of mental health, and lower life expectancies.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the goal of adopting a health equity approach is that everyone "can attain their full health potential without disadvantage due to social position or other socially determined circumstances".<sup>3</sup>

### **Why is health equity important to consider in the context of COVID-19 economic recovery?**

The impacts of COVID-19 public health measures have been felt by all individuals, households, businesses, and communities; but those who have been most affected are priority populations<sup>1,2</sup>. For example:

- A single mother relying on licensed childcare in order to balance two jobs
- A local farmer who may not be able to harvest their crop due to a shortage of workers
- A senior who lives alone and has multiple chronic conditions
- A factory worker who has had their hours of work significantly reduced
- A woman and child living in a household impacted by domestic violence
- Indigenous members of our community experiencing social isolation related to decreased access to and from First Nations communities
- A Black man unable to find permanent housing related to systemic racism

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\* Populations found to be more susceptible to these negative impacts include: people living with low income, children, youth aged 15-24, racialized groups, and Indigenous populations.

† Public health measures include: recommendations to stay home, physical distancing guidance/orders, childcare and school closures, decreased access to health/community/social services, non-essential workplace closures, and the closure of outdoor/community spaces.

Preliminary local, provincial, and national data suggests that there have been negative impacts on physical and mental health, financial stability, employment, child welfare, substance use and addiction, social well-being, as a result of COVID-19 public health measures, particularly among population groups already experiencing health inequities.<sup>1,2</sup> Examples of these impacts include increases in substance use and substance-use related harms, increased reports of social isolation and feelings of stress and depression, increased incidence of domestic violence and increased unemployment rates.

Individuals and households who were experiencing challenges in meeting their basic needs prior to the pandemic are having even more difficulty now.<sup>1,6</sup> For example, more Canadian households have experienced food insecurity during the pandemic (14.6%) compared to before COVID-19 (10.5%).<sup>7</sup> In particular, early in the pandemic, food insecurity was significantly higher among Canadians who were employed but absent from work due to business closure, layoff, or personal circumstances related to COVID-19 (28.4%) compared to those who were working (10.7%).<sup>7</sup>

Income measures such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), and recent changes to the Government of Canada's Employment Insurance program have attempted to mitigate the impacts of the public health measures. While we commend the federal government for the economic measures that have been put into place to support Canadians during the pandemic, we also know that many do not qualify for or are not able to access these programs leaving them vulnerable to household food insecurity and the negative consequences of income insecurity and poverty. Without effective equity based responses to economic recovery at the local municipal level to address additional hardships brought on by COVID-19 public health measures, these growing inequities will continue to get much worse.

### **How can municipalities take action?**

Municipalities have a unique and important leadership role to play in the process of economic recovery from COVID-19 within their communities. As an example, the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit Board of Health has advocated to the federal government to evolve the CERB into a permanent basic income program. In the development of their economic recovery plans, we encourage municipalities to consider how priority populations are being negatively impacted by the pandemic and develop appropriate responses to help mitigate these impacts in collaboration with these populations.

Here are some examples of how municipalities in our region and surrounding area are already considering health equity in their response to COVID-19 or in their discussions about economic recovery:

- Advocating to all levels of government for public policy that ensures basic needs are met for all during the pandemic (e.g. join the health unit in advocating for a permanent basic income program)
- Involving community members, including priority populations in planning and development of economic recovery plans
- Considering equity in transportation and active transportation planning
- Offering/continue to offer free or discounted public transit
- Providing financial support and mentorship to local businesses and entrepreneurs (e.g. providing rent relief to small business owners, offering training sessions or business planning advice and incentives to entrepreneurs)
- Offering individuals and businesses flexibility or deferrals for property tax, water, and utility payments
- Expanding the delivery of affordable childcare services to support parents who are returning to work
- Accelerating the servicing of employment lands and projects to improve access to local jobs.

### **How can the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit assist?**

The health unit can provide support for municipalities to integrate health equity into COVID-19 economic recovery planning. Examples of support we could provide include:

- Providing information on health equity impact assessment tools and resources
- Assisting with health equity training
- Sharing resources and information to support health equity considerations during economic recovery planning
- Participating in municipal recovery planning teams to bring a health equity perspective to discussions
- Working with municipalities to develop equity-based economic recovery plans to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19
- Supporting the review of economic planning documents using an equity lens

Together, we can build vibrant communities where ALL citizens are able to meet their basic needs with dignity, reach their full health potential, and actively contribute to their communities.

### **Sources**

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