

November 7, 2020

TO: Stephanie Smith, President
FROM: Brandon Thistle, OHS Officer
Megan Scott, OHS Officer
cc: Frank Anderson, Regional Coordinator
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SUBJECT: Mask Use and Other Workplace Safety Measures to Address Airborne Transmission of SARS-CoV-2

Issue

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, our understanding of the virus is rapidly evolving. It is now widely recognized that airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2 can occur under certain conditions. Following the lead of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the US's Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) recently updated its guidance to acknowledge that SARS-CoV-2 is spread through aerosols (smaller droplets that can hang in the air for periods of time).¹

As British Columbians are increasingly spending time together indoors, the province is experiencing a significant rise in the number of cases of COVID-19. Yesterday, a record-breaking 567 new cases were identified.² In this context of increasing risk, last week Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry asked employers to review their COVID-19 safety plans.³

In light of these developments, and in keeping with the precautionary principle, the government must immediately review and strengthen measures to minimize exposure to the virus among workers in the BC Public Service. The increased use of masks should be included in these measures.

Key Points

- The employer must fully and seriously consider the risk of airborne transmission of COVID-19 in

¹ See the following links for guidance/ information on SARS-CoV-2 modes of transmission:

Public Health Agency of Canada (October 2020) "COVID-19: Main Modes of Transmission":

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/main-modes-transmission.html>

CDC (October 2020) "Scientific Brief: SARS-CoV-2 and Potential Airborne Transmission":

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/more/scientific-brief-sars-cov-2.html>

WHO (July 2020) "Transmission of SARS-CoV-2: implications for infection prevention precautions":

<https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/transmission-of-sars-cov-2-implications-for-infection-prevention-precautions>

² Dr. Bonnie Henry (PHO) and Adrian Dix (Minister of Health), Nov. 7, 2020, "Joint Statement on Covid-19 responses, latest updates." Retrieved from <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020HLTH0059-001922>

³ Dr. Bonnie Henry (PHO) and Stephen Brown (Deputy Minister of Health), Oct. 26, 2020, "Joint Statement on Covid-19 responses, latest updates." Retrieved from: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020HLTH0317-001895>.

government worksites. Crowded indoor spaces with poor ventilation and involving close-range conversations have been identified by public health authorities as settings that increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission.⁴

- Controls to minimize the risk of transmission must be selected according to the hierarchy of controls. More effective approaches – like substitution and engineering controls – should be chosen first and implemented wherever possible in order to provide the highest level of protection for workers.
- The most effective control is to allow for remote work or other alternative work arrangements that minimize the number of workers at a given workplace, and this should be implemented wherever possible. In light of growing evidence related to airborne transmission, the changing season, and increasing cases, the prudence of government's return to work plan is questionable.
- Where workers are required to attend the workplace, the employer must ensure that additional measures are implemented to minimize risk, and that their effectiveness is monitored. These range from engineering controls like upgrading and adjusting ventilation systems, to administrative controls like staggering schedules and encouraging hand-washing.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is the least effective measure to protect workers, but public health officials are increasingly recommending the use of masks in public and indoor environments, including the workplace. For example:
 - PHAC now recommends that Canadians wear a non-medical mask when they are in any indoor space with people from outside their immediate household; and
 - Dr. Bonnie Henry advised British Columbians last week that wearing a mask in public places is now an "expectation," and that this includes in the workplace. Her statement read that: "If you are in a high-traffic area or among many people outside of your household while at work, a mask will help to protect you and those around you."⁵
- As such, we recommend that where workers are required to be at the workplace, that:
 - Appropriate, high quality masks and training on their use be provided to workers by the employer.
 - Mask use be required more broadly in Public Service workplaces. This includes using masks in common areas, or areas where workers spend significant time with others that are not from their immediate household.
 - Joint Health and Safety Committees or worker representatives (as applicable) must be involved in planning for expanding the use of masks.

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Briefing Note – Mask Use Covid-19

⁴ Public Health Agency of Canada (October 2020) "COVID-19: Main Modes of Transmission": <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/main-modes-transmission.html>.

⁵ Dr. Bonnie Henry (PHO) and Stephen Brown (Deputy Minister of Health), Oct.26, 2020, "Joint Statement on Covid-19 responses, latest updates." Retrieved from: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020HLTH0317-001895>.