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NATHAN DENETTE THE CANADIAN PRESS

Ontario Premier Doug Ford said COVID-19 is spreading rapidly from areas with a high number of cases to those with fewer cases, and the province needs to preserve capacity in its health-care system.

Delay of provincial lockdown concerns Dr. Hirji

Health official fears shoppers from GTA will flock to Niagara stores

GORD HOWARD
THE ST. CATHARINES STANDARD

The right call at the wrong time — that's how Dr. Mustafa Hirji describes Premier Doug Ford's decision Monday to put all of Ontario into full lockdown starting Boxing Day.

Ontario is "absolutely at a level where we needed something dramatic to happen," said Hirji, Niagara's acting medical officer of health.

But it's the delay that bothers him.

"Where I would say we are definitely too late is that the announcement is (Monday), but it doesn't kick in until Saturday ... If we decide that we need to do this, we need to be doing it tonight basically."

His department tracks local cases "pretty much every day" that are linked to people from the Toronto and Peel areas, which have been in lockdown for weeks.

Announcing Monday that a lockdown will start Saturday "is basically signalling to everybody, for four days you need to rush and come here to do your shopping before the lockdown happens."

In making the announcement, Ford cited the "extremely serious" risk of growing case loads across the province overwhelming the health-care system.

For Niagara especially, it marks a head-spinning ascent through levels of restriction: On

Ontario begins lockdown Dec. 26

Province aiming to bring soaring COVID-19 infections under control

SHAWN JEFFORDS
THE CANADIAN PRESS

Ontario will go into lockdown on Boxing Day in an effort to bring soaring COVID-19 cases under control, a move the province announced Monday after health advisers said thousands of infections could be avoided if tough restrictions were imposed earlier.

The lockdown will shutter all non-essential businesses, ban indoor gatherings, close restaurant dining rooms, and see all schools move classes online for the first week of the new year. It also means Ontarians are advised to stay home as much as possible.

The restrictions will remain in place for southern Ontario un-

til Jan. 23, but will lift for northern Ontario — where there are fewer cases — on Jan. 9.

Premier Doug Ford said the virus is spreading rapidly from areas with a high number of cases to those with fewer cases, and the province needs to preserve capacity in its health-care system.

"This difficult action is without a doubt necessary to save lives and prevent our hospitals from being overwhelmed in the coming weeks," he said.

"Make no mistake, thousands of lives are at stake right now."

Hours earlier, the province's health advisers said the sooner a "hard lockdown" was implemented, the more new cases could be prevented.

"If we started on Dec. 21, instead of Dec. 28, it plays out significant reductions in cases under almost any scenario," said Dr. Adalsteinn Brown, co-chair of the province's COVID-19 science advisory table.

Brown added that anything less than a four-week lockdown will not work, based on the experience of other jurisdictions.

Ford defended the decision to wait until Dec. 26 to impose the restrictions, noting that hot spots are already in lockdown.

"We want to give the same opportunities to businesses that haven't experienced lockdown before ... (and) give them the opportunity to get ready to hunker down," he said.

Toronto, Peel Region, York Region, Windsor-Essex, and Hamilton are already in lockdown.

Dr. Naveed Mohammad, CEO of the William Osler Health

System that operates hospitals in Peel Region, said people needed to act as if the lockdown started immediately.

"Until the people of this province realize what each trip out of their home risks for themselves and their loved ones, we won't get through this," he said, noting that hospitals in Brampton are grappling with capacity issues.

"Please stay home, starting today."

The Ontario Hospital Association, which had called for strict new restrictions, said it was disappointed the lockdown wouldn't take effect sooner.

"The Dec. 26 implementation date sends a confusing message about what (residents) should and shouldn't do at this crucial moment," said CEO Anthony Dale.

LOCKDOWN continued on A2

COVID-19 continued on A2

Firefighter rescues woman from Twelve Mile Creek

Andreas Fortis was off duty when he and bystanders raced to help

ALLAN BENNER
THE ST. CATHARINES STANDARD

Andreas Fortis had just finished working a heart-wrenching shift as a firefighter in Brampton early Thursday morning when he found himself thrust into a rescue operation.

After returning to his St. Catharines

home and driving his children to school, he was heading to a gym to work out shortly after 9 a.m.

That's when he saw a young woman sitting on the railing of the bridge that carries Fourth Avenue over Twelve Mile Creek.

Fortis turned around and headed back to the woman. He was one of several people who had stopped to help the woman.

But before anyone could reach her, she fell backwards into the frigid rapids below.

Fortis raced back to his vehicle, and drove down Welland Vale Road to the creek bank, planning to do anything he could to pull the woman to safety.



BOB TYMCZYSZYN TORSTAR

Firefighter Andreas Fortis was near the rapids by the Welland Vale Bridge Thursday when he went into the water to rescue a person.

He was determined.

"I just got off shift when we had a young girl hang herself. We just had a young girl's suicide literally hours before this."

After being unable to help that girl

in Brampton a few hours earlier, Fortis wasn't going to lose another.

"Not today," he thought.

Fortis, 38, wasn't only in the right

RESCUE continued on A2



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