

TITLE: Health Unit Response to Health Hazards

TO: Board of Health

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APPROVED BY: Dr. Natalie Bocking, Medical Officer of Health & CEO

In Camera? Yes No

Overview

- At the May 16, 2024 Board of Health meeting, there was a request for more information on how the Health Unit manages complaints of health hazards from the public.
- This briefing note provides a high-level snapshot of the types of health hazard inquiries received by the Health Unit and how it responds.

Recommendations to Board

THAT the Board of Health receive this briefing note for information.

Introduction

The Health Unit is mandated to respond to inquiries from the public related to health hazard concerns. However, many concerns relate to requirements and regulations that fall under other agencies' jurisdictions. Health Unit staff review each complaint received and follow-up according to the type of health hazard identified and the nature of the concern.

Background

The Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS) outline the minimum requirements of Boards of Health in operationalizing the public health mandate of health units. In the OPHS, a “health hazard” is defined as;

- (a) a condition of a premises,
- (b) a substance, thing, plant or animal other than man, or
- (c) a solid, liquid, gas or combination of any of them, that has or that is likely to have an adverse effect on the health of any person.

As outlined in the Health Hazard Response Protocol, 2019, the Board of Health shall inspect and investigate potential public health hazards in the environment. Specifically, for notifications, complaints and reports received by the Board of Health related to potential or identified health hazards in the environment, the Board of Health shall:

1. Conduct a preliminary risk assessment and carry out inspections and/or investigations where appropriate as potential or identified exposures to health hazards arise within the Health Unit’s jurisdiction.

Intake Assessment

Concerns from the public regarding health hazards are received by Health Unit employees by telephone, and occasionally by email. A public health inspector (PHI) is assigned daily the role of “intake” and does an initial assessment of the complaint. The initial assessment includes determination of whether the issue falls under the jurisdiction of public health or whether there is a more appropriate organization/office to which the complaint should be made. Health Unit employees determine the regulatory framework(s) related to the complaint/notification and notify the lead regulatory partner(s) as appropriate.

For example, complaints related to property standards, garbage, rodent infestation, sewage, outdoor firepits, chicken coops, etc. are referred to the local municipal by-law department. Complaints related to outdoor air quality and odours, environmental spills, and algae blooms, are referred to the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP). Complaints involving employees and the workplace, such as staff complaining of indoor air quality at a library, would be referred to the Ministry of Labour. Typically, we would ask if their Joint Health and Safety Committee has been advised.

Response to Health Hazards

If a known health hazard is identified, the Health Unit will implement necessary control measures to contain any potential or identified exposures; this is often in partnership with other regulatory/government bodies. If there is a known impact on health, the Health Unit ensures that steps are taken to reduce exposure to the hazard and that individuals are aware of the steps they need to take to protect their health. An example would include response to a report of a failing private sewage system. The Health Unit may issue an order to the owner to contain the sewage on the property, fence off the impacted area, and pump out the septic tank until the system is repaired or replaced. The local building department would take the lead regarding the approvals and installation of the sewage system.

Where the Health Unit receives a report of a health hazard in the environment where another Government of Ontario ministry (i.e. Ministry of Labour (MOL), Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP)) has primary responsibility in the matter, the Health Unit works in collaboration with the local, provincial or federal office/agency to address the issue. For example, when a suspected hazardous substance is released into the environment, MECP would be engaged to identify the substance and take the lead to mitigate the issue. The Health Unit would provide information on the health risks of being exposed to the substance and how to reduce your risk.

The Health Unit communicates in partnership with relevant agencies as part of the management and response to potential/confirmed health hazards in the community and the surrounding environment. The Health Unit is also responsible for the inspection and investigation of health hazards in facilities, including inspections of recreational camps annually, boarding and lodging homes upon request or based on a complaint, homes for special care annually upon request for licensing, and other facilities that serve priority or vulnerable populations in situations where they may present an elevated risk of exposure to health hazards to the public or priority populations. These facilities may include, but are not limited to ice arenas, seasonal farm workers' housing, schools, childcare centers and other childcare facilities, shelters, and other facilities that may serve priority populations.

Occasionally, public health inspectors may be required to use enforcement to protect the health of the public. When considering the need for enforcement measures, the following are taken into consideration:

- a) Degree of health risk;

- b) Size and characteristics of the population potentially exposed to the possible, suspect or identified health hazard;
- c) Extent of previous contravention of the legislation, repeat and multiple infractions of the HPPA and applicable regulation;
- d) Enforcement actions available under the HPPA (considering progressive enforcement including educating and warning);
- e) Other enforcement options available through other government mechanisms (i.e. local municipal by laws); and
- f) Efforts to investigate the potential health hazard in collaboration with Ministries which have primary jurisdiction (i.e. MOECC, MOL, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)).

Summary

The Health Unit has a process in place to receive and respond to concerns from the public related to health hazards. Many times, responsibility for mitigation and resolving the health hazard falls to a different agency, and the main role of the Health Unit is to provide health related information including risks of exposure, signs and symptoms, and ensuring referral to the appropriate agency to take action in addressing the hazard.