Public transit, taxis, and other private transportation providers enable basic mobility for many residents of Timiskaming. This document was developed to address concerns related to the safety and availability of transportation services in Timiskaming during the COVID-19 pandemic. What follows is a summary of needs assessment surveys conducted with local transportation providers, examples of risk mitigation measures implemented in other jurisdictions, and evidence for good practices to support safe management of passenger transportation services during COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

Access to safe and reliable transportation services is essential to people of all ages, and especially older adults, children, people with disabilities, people with lower income, and anyone living in a zero-car household. Transportation services by road including taxis and other private transportation providers are deemed essential workplaces by the Government of Ontario, and are thus authorized to remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic. While limited access to transportation is a pre-COVID-19 issue in Timiskaming District, this issue may be greater with the impact of the current pandemic due to physical distancing measures that may limit those already marginalized from accessing their normal support networks for transportation (i.e. friends and neighbours, public transportation, and other services).

LOCAL SITUATION

Though local data is limited, poor access to transportation is perceived to be a concern across the district. Like many small communities in rural northern Ontario, Timiskaming has a dominant car culture. Public transportation is available in only two municipalities in the south end of Timiskaming (Cobalt and Temiskaming Shores). There are four commercial taxi companies that serve the district and a number of local social service agencies that provide limited transportation services to their clientele. Timiskaming-specific transportation concerns were echoed between survey respondents of the Age Friendly Community Surveys in Temiskaming Shores and Kirkland Lake. Cost, lack of availability, and not wanting to inconvenience others were cited as the top three barriers preventing survey respondents from accessing transportation. As the population in Timiskaming continues to age, transportation will become a concern for a larger proportion of the population. Interviews of Timiskaming residents with lived experience of opioid use revealed that many struggle with accessing transportation in rural areas and cope with difficulties seeking mental health, addiction treatment, and primary care services. In general, Timiskaming residents may face barriers to basic mobility related to rurality and limited options for public transportation.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TRANSPORTATION AND MOBILITY

Access to affordable and reliable transportation impacts our physical, mental and social health and well-being. With current stay-at-home orders, and many workers temporarily laid off or working from home, the need for transportation may be significantly curtailed compared to pre-pandemic times. Additionally, fear of exposure to infectious diseases including COVID-19 may affect ridership and contribute to rider and driver anxieties. However, many Timiskaming residents continue to rely on transportation services to carry out essential activities of daily living during the pandemic. Physical distancing measures that may limit individuals’ support networks for transportation could result in
increased reliance on public and private transportation providers. As a result of COVID-19, transit users may face reduced schedules and fewer options for transportation, which may adversely impact their ability to access health care, consumer services, employment and educational opportunities and social services. Mobile testing options are available for residents in Timiskaming who may be struggling to find transportation to a COVID-19 testing center.

PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF DISEASE

To balance the need for service continuity against the risk of community spread, passenger transportation providers across Ontario have implemented various risk mitigation practices. To address instances when it is not possible to maintain a distance of at least 2 meters from others, the use of non-medical face masks or transparent physical partitions has been broadly recommended by Public Health Agency of Canada, the US CDC, and the World Health Organization.\(^8\) Transportation providers are encouraged to review the hierarchy of controls in Appendix C when considering which controls may be most appropriate based on their operational circumstances. The Government of Ontario has recommended that public transit riders wear non-medical face masks or coverings, and has urged transit providers to ensure physical distancing by allowing fewer passengers on board, installing plexiglass partitions between riders and operators, limiting touch points (e.g. exchanges of cash or receipts), ensuring alcohol-based hand sanitizers are available, and enhancing cleaning and disinfection measures.\(^9\) For a list of emerging best practices for risk mitigation see Appendix B. For more guidance resources and case examples, see Appendix D.

SUMMARY OF LOCAL TRANSPORTATION PROVIDER SURVEYS

In May 2020, the Timiskaming Health Unit surveyed local transportation providers to gauge local needs and concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. All survey respondents expressed readiness to implement changes to their transportation service to reduce the risk of community spread. Most survey respondents expressed interest in acquiring plexiglass barriers to separate the driver from passenger(s). The evidence suggests that such plexiglass or polycarbonate barriers are effective at blocking respiratory droplets.\(^8\) However, this approach must be complemented with other individual measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 such as frequent handwashing, staying home when sick, and enhanced cleaning following infection prevention and control (IPAC) guidance. Local barriers to acquiring polycarbonate partitions include cost and finding a local business to create and install the dividers. For a full summary of survey results, see Appendix E.

CONCLUSION

The public and private transportation system continues to provide a crucial lifeline for many Timiskaming residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure the safety of our essential transportation workers and their passengers, it is recommended that transportation providers continue to consult with public health as needs arise. Cost and availability of PPE and polycarbonate partitions have been identified as barriers to effective risk mitigation by local transportation providers. The evidence presented in this document informs a number of potential actions and includes practical case examples of measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Timiskaming Health Unit has adapted and disseminated COVID-19 risk mitigation guidance (web and direct) for transportation providers and passengers. Opportunities to further support essential transportation providers in implementing administrative and environmental controls to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission should be explored further.
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References


WHAT IS COVID-19?
COVID-19 is an illness caused by a coronavirus. Symptoms of human coronaviruses may be very mild or more serious, such as fever, cough, and difficulty breathing and may take up to 14 days to appear after exposure to the virus (PHAC, 2020).

TRANSMISSION
What We Know
Person-to-Person:
Coronaviruses are most commonly spread from an infected person through:
- respiratory droplets when coughing or sneezing.
  - These droplets can spread up to two metres/six feet (Government of Canada, 2020)
- close personal contact, such as touching or shaking hands
- touching something with the virus on it, then touching the eyes, nose or mouth before washing hands (PHAC, 2020).

Surface Transmission:
- Surface transmission is possible. A limited number of studies have shown that SARS-CoV-2 can survive for around 4 days on plastic, glass, and stainless steel surfaces and for up to three hours on paper and tissue (NCCEH, 2020).

ASSUMPTIONS
- Symptomatic cases of COVID-19 are causing the majority of transmission;
- Person-to-person transmission is mostly occurring via infectious respiratory droplets;
- Airborne transmission is not known to be routinely occurring in community settings;
- Fecal-oral and body fluid transmission of COVID-19 viruses could be occurring although risk is very low (Government of Canada, 2020).
- There is some evidence that COVID-19 transmission may be affected by changes in temperatures and humidity which may affect droplet viability (NCCEH, 2020).
OPTIONS FOR RISK REDUCTION IN PASSENGER TRANSPORTATION VEHICLES

Maintaining safe access to transportation services is a challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic. While physical distancing is essential and effective in reducing infectious disease transmission, it will not always be possible to maintain the recommended distance between the driver and passenger(s). To protect the health of essential transportation workers and their passengers, transit providers should establish clear safety protocols for providing reasonable accommodation to the community, including potentially contagious individuals. Following is a number of potential actions to reduce the risk of disease transmission in passenger transportation vehicles.

Note: It is important that each vehicle be assessed for transmission risks such that the appropriate combination of measures can be implemented.

- Develop a COVID-19 workplace safety plan using the guide from the Government of Ontario.
- Perform routine environmental cleaning and disinfection of vehicles.
- Actively encourage sick employees/drivers to stay home.
- Ask individuals with symptoms or who are COVID-19 positive who need to travel for essential health care appointments to drive themselves or ask a friend or family member to take them if possible.
- Drivers and passengers should wear a non-medical face mask or covering whenever physical distancing cannot be maintained.
- If possible, a physical barrier, such as a clear polycarbonate sheet, should be installed between the driver and back passenger seats to protect the driver and prevent the need for driver PPE.
  - If installation of a physical barrier is not possible, the driver should follow the PPE recommendations.
- Seats or seat covers should be made of a smooth, non-absorbent, wipeable material (e.g., vinyl or leather) which is free from breaks, cracks, open seams, chips, pits and similar imperfections.
  - If seats or seat covers are not wipeable, then disposable seat covers should be used and changed between each passenger.
- Maximize distance between the passenger(s) and driver (i.e. ask passenger to sit in the back seat opposite driver, prohibit passengers from sitting in the front seat).
- Encourage and provide opportunities for hand hygiene (i.e. make hand sanitizer available for passenger and driver use).
- Minimize shared rides so passengers are not traveling with individuals unknown to them/outside of their household.
- Open the car windows to allow for airflow.
- Control heating, ventilation, and air conditions to reduce the spread of contamination (i.e. avoid the re-circulated air option).
- Use a touchless payment method such as online pre-pay or credit/debit card tap.
  - Consider wearing disposable gloves if cash payment is required and dispose of gloves and complete hand hygiene immediately afterward.
- Follow cough and sneeze etiquette by coughing into a tissue or your elbow, and disposing of the tissue into a waste bin after exiting the vehicle.
• **Consider posting signage** addressing respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene in the vehicle.\(^{10}\)
• **Share current public health guidance** with passengers and drivers.
• **Minimize the number of vehicles shared by employees** to limit the spread of the virus between different users of the same vehicles where possible.\(^{12}\)

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**Appendix C**

**Hierarchy of Controls: COVID-19 Mitigation in Vehicles**

**AN EXCERPT FROM:** [Risk Reduction and Personal Protective Equipment in the Transportation System: Federal/Provincial/Territorial Guiding Principles](https://www.ministrans.gov.on.ca/content/dam/ministrans/documents/services/atmp-tasc/transportation-guiding-principles.pdf) (Council of Ministers Responsible for Transportation and Highway Safety)

For greater clarity, the hierarchy of controls is a framework proposed by the Johns Hopkins Education and Research Center for Occupational Safety and Health and WorkSafe BC that aims to reduce transmission hazards. Because it is a generic model for broad consideration across different types of workplaces, each element of the transportation system will need to consider appropriate application of mitigation measures based on their own individual/operational circumstances, including potentially a combination of mitigation measures.

1. **Physical Distancing:** In the context of COVID-19, this administrative control involves maintaining a two metre distance from other persons at all times.
2. **Engineering controls:** These are physical changes in the workplace, such as installing protective barriers in a transit bus or at a ticketing counter.
3. **Administrative controls:** This involves altering work practices to minimize exposure, such as postponing, re-organizing, or planning work in such a way that workers are not exposed to any risk. This could also involve minimizing the numbers of passengers inside a conveyance, staggering work shifts, making virtual appointments, working from home etc.
4. **PPE and non-medical masks/face coverings:** This involves protective gear, such as masks and gloves, to prevent exposure to hazards.

Not all practices and tips are intended to be implemented at once or at all times, and implementation of these measures may be gradual as passengers return and trips increase.
METHOD

On May 22 the Timiskaming Health Unit conducted a scan of public health websites, Canadian news sites, and social media sites to obtain information on what is happening across Canada with regards to changes to public and private passenger transportation services. The purpose of this search therefore was to review what other jurisdictions and service providers are doing across Ontario to balance the risk of COVID-19 while keeping essential transportation services accessible to the public.

EXAMPLES (next page)
## Guidance resources for safe management of passenger transportation services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health</td>
<td>Best practices for designing transparent partitions in commercial settings</td>
<td><a href="https://ncceh.ca/content/blog/physical-barriers-covid-19-infection-prevention-and-control-commercial-settings">https://ncceh.ca/content/blog/physical-barriers-covid-19-infection-prevention-and-control-commercial-settings</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council of Ministers Responsible for Transportation and Highway Safety</td>
<td>Risk Reduction and Personal Protective Equipment in the Transportation System: Federal/Provincial/Territorial Guiding Principles</td>
<td><a href="https://ncceh.ca/content/blog/physical-barriers-covid-19-infection-prevention-and-control-commercial-settings">Hierarchy of controls</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council of Ministers Responsible for Transportation and Highway Safety</td>
<td>Practices for the use of masks, face coverings and gloves for transportation workers and passengers in the road transportation system</td>
<td><a href="https://ncceh.ca/content/blog/physical-barriers-covid-19-infection-prevention-and-control-commercial-settings">COMT Practices</a></td>
</tr>
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</table>
Taxi and public transport in the news

Sudbury company Rezplast developed a plastic and Velcro system to separate workers who must ride in the same vehicle. [Click for full story.]

Speedy Glass Orillia is creating and installing lexan barriers between driver and passenger for municipal vehicles, taxis, non-urgent medical transportation providers, and construction companies. [Click for full story.]

Toronto GoTransit (Metrolinx) - Daily health screening for each worker. Protective shields set up around GO bus driver’s to increase separation. [Click for story.]
Calgary, AB - Taxi company installed temporary barriers in cabs. Click for full story.

Montreal - City of Montreal helping to fund protections for taxi drivers such as the installation of plexiglass barriers and purchasing of hygienic products. One taxi driver covered all seats with leather for easy cleaning/disinfecting. Click for full story.

St. John’s
- Taxi company installed plastic shields.
- Passengers are no longer allowed to sit in the front seat of cabs, and all cars enforce a two-passenger limit
- Dispatch manager urges public to remain home unless travel is absolutely necessary. Click for full story.

UBER Canada - As of May 18, Uber requires Canadian drivers, couriers and passengers to wear face masks or coverings. Click for full story.
SURVEY 1: TRANSPORTATION TO COVID-19 TESTING SITES

Method
On May 12 the Timiskaming Health Unit conducted telephone surveys with four taxi companies that serve the district of Timiskaming. The purpose of the survey was to learn about transportation options for Timiskaming residents to get to a COVID-19 Assessment Centre, as well as to understand the needs of local taxi companies in providing transportation services during the pandemic.

Summary of Results:
Between the four survey respondents, there are 21 taxi vehicles used for passenger transportation purposes across the District. At the time the survey was conducted, three taxi companies reported having received requests to transport community members to a local drive-thru assessment centre or emergency department for COVID-19 testing. Of the three companies that had received this request, one company provided the transportation service to a testing site. If requested in the future, only one company indicated they would be willing to provide transportation to a local COVID-19 assessment centre with the condition that “they have the proper PPE”. Two companies expressed they would be willing to expand their services to transport community members to testing sites if they are able to acquire plexiglass dividers for their vehicles. The challenges of procuring plexiglass barriers identified by survey respondents include the cost of plexiglass during this time of reduced ridership and revenue, figuring out who can create and install the divider locally, concerns over how the divider may impact air ventilation, as well as concern over how the divider may affect vehicle insurance. The survey respondents reported varying levels of precautions that had been applied to their business operations as a result of COVID-19 including:

- Enhancing vehicle cleaning and disinfection measures
- Encouraging use of back seat, or prohibiting passengers to sit in front seat
- Restricting the number of people allowed in the car at one time. Note: Some companies make allowances for family (i.e. parents and children)
- Providing hand sanitizer for use in vehicle
- Refusing calls from 12am-6am from people who are assumed to be at a social gathering
- Refusing rides to individuals who are coughing or who disclose symptoms
- Letting a vehicle sit unused for three days if unsure how to properly sanitize it; rotating vehicles as needed
- Reducing hours of operation

Survey respondents indicated a need for support in finding ways to separate passengers from the driver, as well as a need for increased public awareness of COVID-19 and the precautions community members should take to reduce the risk of community spread in vehicles. One respondent expressed the need for customers requesting rides from the hospital to be wearing proper PPE (masks) out of concern for driver safety.

Method
From May 22-25, the Timiskaming Health Unit conducted a telephone survey with five transportation providers located within Timiskaming. Four of the survey respondents were social service agencies with a client transportation program, and the fifth respondent was a public transportation provider. The objective of the survey was to learn about transportation options for Timiskaming residents during COVID-19, as well as to understand local needs in providing transportation services during the pandemic.

Summary of Results:
Between the five survey respondents, there are 12 vehicles used for passenger transportation services. Of the social service agencies surveyed, transportation service provision followed three models: (1) the agency provides transportation for clients by way of volunteer and/or agency-employed drivers, or (2) the agency provides money to clients to be used toward cab or bus fare, or (3) a blend of the two models. Where the public transit provider provides services to the general public, social service agency transportation services were restricted to clients of the respective agency, and services are generally targeted to specific populations including seniors, families, women and children, foster parents, Ontario Disability Support Program recipients, as well as Ontario Works recipients. Client need for transportation varies by agency and are as follows:

- Medical appointments (within and outside of the District)
- Errands, groceries, and social outings
- Agency related appointments
- Rides to/from school and children’s activities
- Employment assistance including rides to work, job interviews, basic education, job-specific training, and workshops on resume writing and interviewing
- Transportation to emergency shelter from a housing emergency or another crisis situation

All survey respondents reported that ridership has decreased significantly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public transit in the City of Temiskaming Shores has been temporarily operating free of charge for all passengers travelling for essential purposes. One surveyed agency reported that they had shut down transportation services entirely due to COVID-19. Another agency has discontinued providing transportation services using agency-owned vehicles but is continuing to provide bus tickets and cab fare to clients. Other reasons given to explain the decrease in ridership are as follows:

- The need for transportation has decreased considering current stay-at-home orders,
- Less people are going to work and therefore have a reduced need to travel and/or have less money to spend on transportation,
- Many non-urgent medical appointments have been cancelled,
- Limited seating is available to allow for physical distancing,
- Agency is currently not taking any new clients,
- Agency is no longer providing out of town trips due to COVID-19, and
- Agency is limiting the number of outings that individuals may request per week

Survey respondents have implemented varying levels of precautionary measures to allow for transportation service continuity including:

- Introduced symptom screening procedure for passengers (1)
- Introduced symptom screening procedure for drivers (2)
- Installed physical barriers in vehicle (1)
- Enhanced cleaning and disinfection procedures (2)
- Reduced the number of passengers allowed in a vehicle at one time (i.e. no passenger sitting next to driver, prohibit ride-sharing between passengers unknown to each other). (2)

All survey respondents indicated willingness to implement changes to passenger transportation vehicles to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19. For example – installing plexiglass barriers, enhancing cleaning measures, and placing signage with precautionary measures for passengers and drivers. Some survey respondents identified factors preventing them from accessing these supports such as challenges in finding someone locally to make a plexiglass barrier with an engineering stamp, and difficulties procuring sanitizer and PPE due to higher demand. Reduced revenue during COVID-19 was identified as a barrier to making necessary upgrades to vehicles such as installing plexiglass partitions. One agency that relies on volunteer drivers for their client transportation program expressed concern over how many drivers will still be willing to volunteer once the program starts up again, which may affect the agency’s ability to offer the service.

Conclusion

Of the local agencies, taxi companies, and public transit provider surveyed, all respondents expressed readiness to implement further changes to their transportation service to reduce the risk of community spread of COVID-19. While ridership has generally decreased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for transportation services is still apparent, and we may see ridership start to increase closer to normal levels as the pandemic continues. Most survey respondents expressed interest in acquiring polycarbonate partitions to separate the driver from passenger(s). Barriers to implementing appropriate measures in vehicles include cost and availability of PPE (masks) and polycarbonate partitions. Opportunities to support essential transportation providers in implementing administrative and environmental controls to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission should be explored further.