

Nfld. & Labrador

COVID-19 vaccine won't be mandatory, says N.L. premier, as team formed to distribute it

3 new cases and 5 new recoveries, dropping province's active caseload to 27

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Premier Andrew Furey says a vaccine logistics team is in place as the province prepares for its first shipment. (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador)

While Newfoundland and Labrador is reporting three new cases of COVID-19, Premier Andrew Furey says a vaccine logistics team is now in place.

All of the new cases announced Friday are in the Eastern Health region: a man between 40 and 49, a man between 30 and 39 and a woman between 30 and 39.

The first case is travel-related — a worker returning home from Alberta — while exposure source for the latter two cases is under investigation. All of these cases are self-isolating and contact tracing is underway.

For Friday's travel-related case, the health department is asking passengers, out of an abundance of caution, who travelled on Westjet Flight 3428 from Halifax to St. John's arriving Thursday, Nov. 26 to call 811 to arrange COVID-19 testing.

There have been five recoveries since Thursday's update, lowering the province's active caseload to 27. The total number of recoveries since March is now 312.

Newfoundland and Labrador's total number of cases rises to 343, with 63,839 people having been tested, including 312 in the last day.

Furey said Newfoundland and Labrador's COVID-19 vaccine team will include Health Minister John Haggie, Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Janice Fitzgerald, Cmdr. David Botting of the Canadian Armed Forces, Indigenous Affairs Minister Lisa Dempster and Municipalities Minister Derek Bennett.

The premier said the vaccination will be "highly suggested" but not **mandatory**.

"It's a free and democratic society and people have choices and sometimes people don't make the right choices," he said. "Everyone should avail of it when it's available to them."

Watch the full Dec. 4 update:

Fitzgerald said the province has administered more than 200,000 influenza vaccinations as of Friday, about 40 per cent of the population. But, she said, the focus now on working with the federal government for COVID-19 vaccine distribution in the new year.

"There is a wide array of logistics for us to determine, as this is anticipated to be the most complex and ambitious vaccine distribution ever delivered to Canada," she said. "We will provide updates as we learn more."

The country is now in preparation mode, with 14 distribution points ready to [receive the Pfizer vaccine starting on Dec. 14.](#)

Fitzgerald said Newfoundland and Labrador is likely to receive a combination of vaccines, including the Pfizer product in the first run and the Moderna vaccine later. She said both are expected in the first quarter of 2021.

Also on Thursday the Department of Health advised rotational workers about an identified COVID-19 outbreak at the Suncor MacKay River oil sands site in Alberta. The department said it was notified about the outbreak by the Public Health Agency of Canada as workers from this province work on the site.

These workers, who have returned to Newfoundland and Labrador in the last 14 days, must self-isolate, physically distance away from household members and call 811 to arrange COVID-19 testing. They must also complete the full 14-day self-isolation period, regardless of test result.

Haggie repeats apology

It's been an interesting week when it comes to COVID-19 in Newfoundland and Labrador.

There were [zero new cases](#) on Thursday, the first day the province didn't have at least one new positive since Nov. 16.

This week also saw Haggie face intense scrutiny for his decision to host a fundraising event at at Bally Haly, a golf and country club in the east end of St. John's.

The two-hour, \$250-per-person reception at Bally Haly came just hours after Haggie spoke [at Wednesday's COVID-19 briefing](#), warning that people considering attending New Year's Eve

gatherings were putting themselves "in harm's way."

- [Haggie apologizes for fundraiser 'fuss,' but stops short of saying event shouldn't have happened](#)

He initially defended the event, but later in the day, changed his tune. However, his apology seemingly centred around the stir it caused, and not for having the event in the first place.

"I think hindsight is always 20/20.... For the fuss it caused, it probably wasn't worth it," he told reporters Thursday afternoon.

On Friday, Haggie apologized again.

"I think it's very clear that that decision was unwise," Haggie said. "My concern now is that public confidence in the public health measures and guidelines advanced by the chief medical officer of health may have in some way been shaken or weakened, and that certainly is not, and can not, be justified."

Haggie, who said public health guidelines were followed and that 23 people attended in a space that can hold 200 — had the support of Premier Andrew Furey, who said he was OK with it.

Others didn't share that opinion.

The story prompted hundreds of comments online, with the majority condemning the event.

"There was no reason for this fundraiser at this time. I have always been Liberal but I will not condone behaviour such as this exhibited by ministers Haggie and Dempster or any other MHA who is fundraising at such a critical time," Ivy Anthony wrote on twitter.

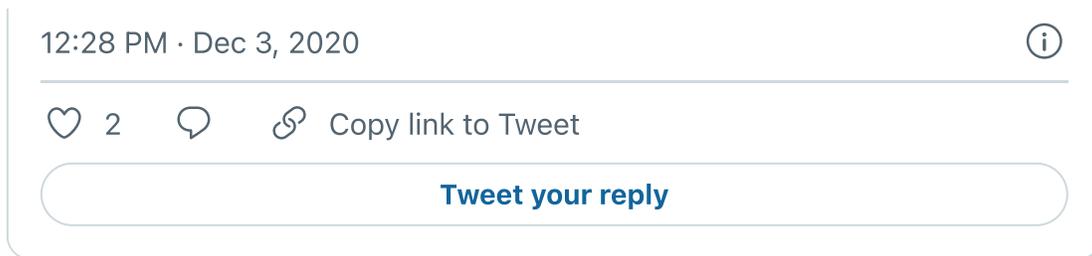


Matthew Gough
@maougha



Replying to @CBCNL

Nah sorry. Even if it fits the guidelines or whatever. This is one of those unesserary events. This is right up there with church gatherings and parties as I'm concerned they can Skype and e-transfer their money should be sending it to food banks though.



Some defended the health minister.

"OMG, people, it was 23 people in a space that can accommodate 250. [Have] none of these complainers been to McDonald's, Costco, Walmart lately?" wrote Karen Saunders Greene on Facebook.

Haggie said he read some of those messages and comments.

"These I've taken to heart. There are lessons that I've learned from this and I've taken those to heart, too," he said. "So one again I want to take this opportunity to repeat that apology."

Throughout the pandemic Fitzgerald has preached kindness, compassion and support, specifically in the light of new COVID-19 cases and families of rotational workers.

But, she said, the same applies to Haggie's situation.

"We're in an enviable position really, when compared to other jurisdictions, and I would like to say that I think the minister is a big part of that," she said. "His willingness to listen to evidence and let the public health science lead the way is an important part of our situation, where we are, where we find ourselves right now."

Back in or staying out? Atlantic bubble update next week

[This week also saw a reopening](#), of sorts, for the Town of Deer Lake. The town hall and the Hodder Memorial Recreation Centre were shut down as the cases related to a cluster in the town rose. Some businesses ceased operations, too.

With an update on the Atlantic bubble expected Monday, Deer Lake Mayor Dean Ball was asked whether he agreed with rejoining the bubble for travel among the four Atlantic provinces, on the heels of a cluster in the town.

Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Janice Fitzgerald says Newfoundland and Labrador is likely to receive a combination of vaccines, including the Pfizer product in the first run and the Moderna vaccine later. (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador)

He said there isn't an easy answer to that.

"As a mayor of a small town in western Newfoundland and an airport community, I certainly don't want to see the bubble go away. But we have taken some drastic measures ourselves to stop this dreadful virus. We need to do that," he told CBC News.

"Whatever decision they make is not going to be easy for us to take, especially as an airport community. That's our lifeline. It's a hard decision"

- **[N.L. to pull out of Atlantic bubble for 2 weeks, says premier](#)**

N.L. announced Nov. 23 it was pulling out of the bubble that allowed travel to and from the Atlantic provinces, with no self-isolation required.

Furey noted things had changed, including fast-rising case counts in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Now, people coming from the Atlantic provinces are required to self-isolate for 14 days,

but they do not need an exemption form.

[***Read more from CBC Newfoundland and Labrador***](#)

With files from Stephanie Kinsella and Colleen Connors

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