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LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH MATTERS

Northwestern Health Unit (NWHU) provides programs and services that promote well-being, prevent disease and injury, and protect population health. Our work, often done in collaboration with local partners and within the broader health care system, results in a healthier population and reduces future demand on costly and scarce health and human service resources.

WELCOME!

Welcome to our first-ever edition of **Local Public Health Matters**. As we continue through 2023 – our 75th year providing local public health – it is becoming increasingly important for you, our partners and funders, to get a real feel for what Northwestern Health Unit is doing in your communities to encourage Healthy Lifestyles, Longer Lives, Lived Well.

From humble beginnings in 1948 with a staff of six and a budget of \$25,000, NWHU features a distributed services model with offices in 12 municipalities across the region providing a wide range of services under the authority of the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, related legislation, regulations, and service standards. We **know** residents of northwestern Ontario are thankful to have programs and services nearby. Local public health really does matter.

Working with, and in, local schools to support student health

Northwestern Health Unit (NWHU) collaborates with area school boards to offer school services and programs for students, parents and guardians, and school staff to foster healthy growth and development and encourage positive behaviours in a nurturing educational environment.

Supporting student health in schools, our multi-disciplinary teams include public health nurses, public health inspectors, dental hygienists, social workers, health promoters, and health educators.

Partnerships with schools allow for an efficient and effective way to address the needs of students by reducing barriers that students and families may face when accessing services or information outside of the school environment.



See page 3 for a full list of programs and services we offer in schools.

THIS IS PUBLIC HEALTH



Oral Care



School Health



Emergency Management



Food Safety



Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being



Healthy Environment



Safe Water



Substance Use and Injury Prevention



Effective Public Health Practice



Healthy Growth and Development



Population Health Assessment



Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control



Immunization



Health Equity



NWHU adds to the capacity in the health care sector

Compared to the province as a whole, those living in the NWHU catchment area have less access to health care services. This results in a greater proportion of the population without a family doctor, greater travel times and distances to see a clinician and specialists, and more restricted access to long term care homes, and home care compared to other jurisdictions. Higher rates of chronic diseases and more complex patients leads to greater demands on the limited health care services available. This was an issue before the pandemic and worsened since then.

Limited capacity in the health care services increases demands on public health programming.

Limited capacity in the health care services increases demands on public health programming. It increases demand for NWHU-led vaccination clinics, smoking cessation services, sexual health services and staff time for complex case follow up for diseases such

as Tb, HIV, and syphilis. Time spent filling the gaps in health care services reduces staff capacity for mandatory public health work.

For example, an analysis of our vaccination program shows that NWHU provides a much greater proportion of area vaccines

we reduced vaccination efforts to a level similar to other health units, approximately 50% of our VPD (vaccine preventable diseases) staff time and budget could be reallocated to other public health programming. We have delayed trying to shift this work to the primary care sector because they are facing significant challenges with recruitment and high demands for service.

compared to other health units because our primary care and pharmacy sectors do not have similar capacity to many other jurisdictions. If

INVESTING

in the early years can save the system nearly 25% in publicly funded services per person. Improving a child's mental health from moderate to high can lead to lifetime savings of \$140,000.



Did you know? Food Insecurity is a real problem for people in northwestern Ontario

Food insecurity is defined as 'the inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints'. To measure food affordability, registered dietitians from NWHU measure the cost of food in our region using the standardized Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) tool. The average cost of groceries for a month in NWHU catchment area is calculated by measuring the prices of 61 basic food items across 11 stores in our communities. This cost of healthy eating (the cost of a nutritious food basket) and local data about rental costs and incomes, including social assistance rates, are used to assess food affordability. The income scenarios are reported in *Food Insecurity and the Nutritious Food Basket – Northwestern Health Unit*.



**\$1,295
PER MONTH**

The monthly cost of food in 2022 for a family of four in northwestern Ontario was \$1,295.18 (2 adults and 2 children under 14 years of age: 1 child age 8, 1 child age 14). This report supports existing evidence that shows the root cause of food insecurity is poverty, not food. When money is tight, people must cut into their food budget to pay for other non-negotiable living expenses such as rent and utilities.

Food is a basic human right, and everyone should have the physical and financial means to access nutritious food. Not being able to afford a nutritious diet can seriously affect the health of individuals, families and our communities.

We share this data widely to help stakeholders and partners in our catchment area to learn all about income-based solutions; policies to reduce poverty, improve living wages, and about closing the gap between income and the cost of living.

NWHU programs and services in schools around the region:

Dental screenings PreVenture Program

Inclusive and positive services

Student Support Navigators Immunizations

Physical activity supports

Confidential sexual health counselling and services

Nutrition on Weekends

Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program Healthy environment support

Smoke Free Ontario enforcement

Student Nutrition Program

2022/23 SCHOOL YEAR

47 school meal/snack programs were funded by SNP

42 schools and 31 First Nations schools participated in the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program for K-8 students from January to June 2023.

Nutrition on Weekends (NOW) programs were offered in 39 schools for over 900 students (with support from schools and community partners).

NWHU funds one meal or snack program per school in almost all (98%) schools in the region.

In the NWHU catchment area 20.1% of households are food insecure.

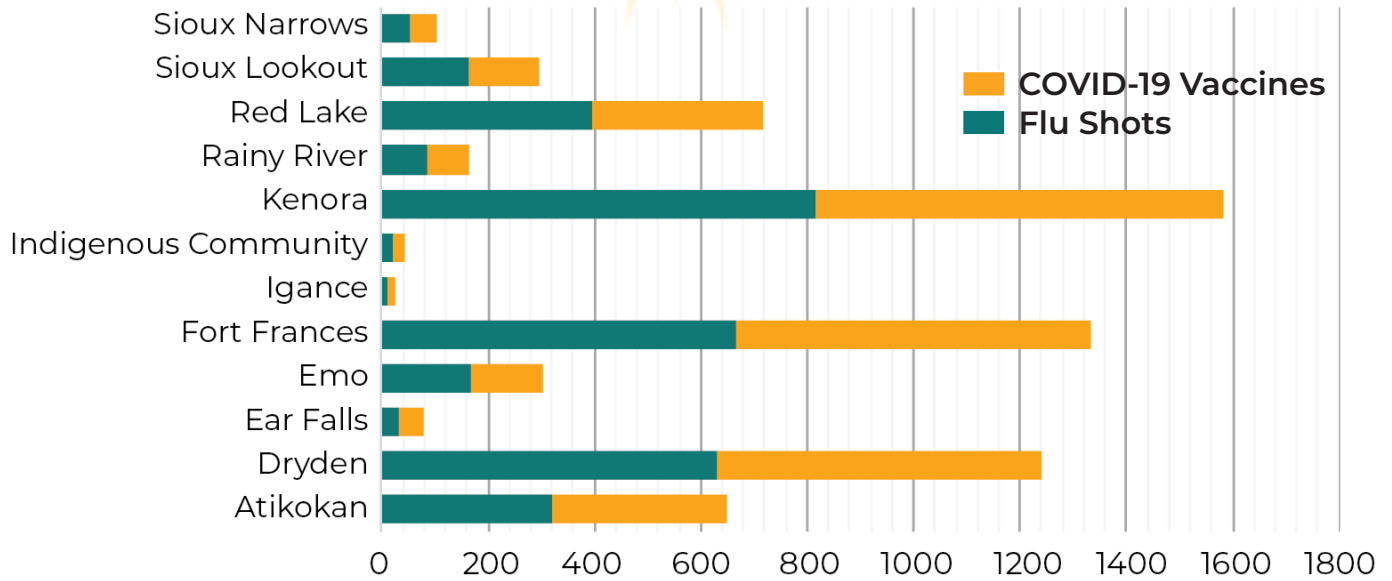
“We have so many children who need this program. It is the reason some of our students come to school.”

-Robert Moore School Administration speaking about NWHU's Student Nutrition Program

**LOCAL
PUBLIC
HEALTH
MATTERS**

ACTIVITY SNAPSHOT

NWHU Staff - COVID-19/Flu Administered by Location



The chart above shows what NWHU staff are doing in your communities to keep residents of northwestern Ontario healthy. Over **3,300 flu shots** were administered as were nearly **3,200 COVID-19 vaccines**. All this in just the month of October 2023. Below you can see how well our Vaccine & Preventable Diseases Team is doing with the school vaccine target rates - especially in the JK - Grade 7 range.

Birthyear/ Grades	Vaccines	Compliance Rate (not overdue)			Number of Students Overdue for Vaccines			Number of Students Due for Vaccines		
		Oct 22	Dec 22	Jun 12	Oct 22	Dec 22	Jun 12	Oct 22	Dec 22	Jun 12
JK-Grade 7 Birth Year 2010-2018	Tetanus, diphtheria, polio, pertussis, measles, mumps, rubella, varicella, meningococcal	84.52%	85.32%	97.90%	853	945	128	1078	1443	440
Grade 8-12 Birth Year 2005-2009	Tetanus, diphtheria, polio, pertussis, measles, mumps, rubella, meningococcal	64.00%	68.25%	85.64%	1837	1321	526	450	6	21

*June 12, 2023 was the date the report was generated.

Find out more about NWHU programs and services

Program updates to our Board of Health are recorded and available on YouTube. These 10-15-minute videos will give you an update on health unit programs and issues:



- [Family Health Program Update](#), August 2023
- [Dental Health Program Update](#), August 2023
- [Vaccine Preventable Disease Program Annual Update](#), October 2023
- [Environmental Health Annual Update](#), October 2023



FALL RESPIRATORY SEASON UPDATE

Get your annual flu vaccine and updated COVID-19 vaccine as soon as you are eligible to protect you and your loved ones this respiratory season. Get vaccinated by contacting your local pharmacy or health care provider, or by making an appointment by visiting the health unit's Booking a COVID-19 or Flu Vaccine Appointment page.

It is important for everyone to stay up-to-date with their vaccinations for the best protection from severe illness or hospitalization, especially those with weaker immune systems. The updated COVID-19 vaccine targets the XBB strain of the Omicron variant to boost protection against severe COVID-19 and may be better against currently circulating variants.

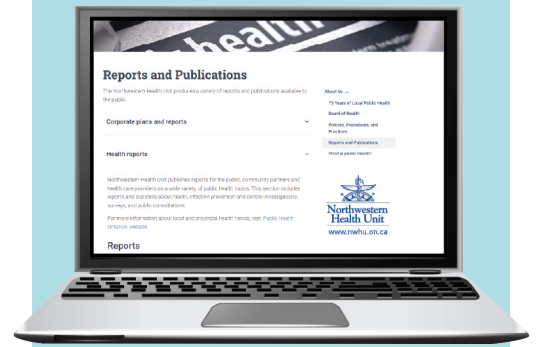
For more information, on COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses, visit online: Protection from COVID19 and other respiratory illnesses – ontario.ca

NWHU and OHTs

The Ontario government is in the process of trying to build a connected health care system centered around patients, families and caregivers which will strengthen local services and ultimately make it easier for patients to navigate the entire health care system.

A major part of that process is the growing number of Ontario Health Teams being introduced across the province. These OHTs aim to provide a new way of organizing and delivering care that is more connected to patients in their local communities. There are 57 Ontario Health Teams across the province that have been approved through a standardized intake and assessment process - including three here in northwestern Ontario.

NWHU works with the three Ontario Health Teams in its catchment area:



Local health reports available online

Northwestern Health Unit publishes reports on our website for the public, community partners and health care providers on a wide variety of public health topics. Recent reports include:

COMPASS : 2022/23

Report for Northwestern Region

The report summarizes results from an annual survey of grade 9-12 students in participating schools regarding cannabis use, obesity, mental health, physical activity, alcohol use, smoking, and sedentary behaviour.

Opioid Report : 2023

The report outlines recent trends in opioid-related mortality and morbidity within the Northwestern Health Unit catchment area. Local and provincial statistics on deaths, hospitalizations, and emergency room visits are included in this report.

Watch for our **Child & Youth Mental Health Outcomes** report coming soon.

Public Health Matters

The format of this update is adapted from a series produced by the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (aLPHA) called *Public Health Matters*.