

Tuesday October 19, 2021

Respected and Honourable Premier, Ministers, Chief and Medical Officers of Health,

We are writing to you seeking a loosening of restrictions at houses of worship that have implemented a vaccine credentials mandate or policy.

The Canadian Muslim COVID-19 Task Force has remained proactive throughout the pandemic using the precautionary principle to safeguard our communities, recommending measures and temporary modifications to religious services and at times in advance of government and public health mandates, based on the evolving circumstances and scientific evidence. Over 30 mosques have opened their doors to host vaccination clinics and we have been actively promoting uptake of the COVID-19 vaccines since December 2020 via a multipronged strategy, including most recently a vaccine credentials implementation plan for mosques. This is already a requirement for houses of worship in New Brunswick, and is strongly recommended by Toronto Public Health as well.

We are pleased to see that as of October 15, 2021, 83% of eligible Ontarians have received 2 doses and 87% have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. After one of the longest lockdowns in North America, Ontarians are happy to have a semblance of normalcy with the reopening of sports arenas to maximum capacity, and with small businesses including restaurants and gyms following shortly thereafter. Although deemed an essential service, houses of worship still have capacity restrictions in place that are capped at the number of persons that can safely physically distance, 2 metres apart.

The Ask:

Houses of worship including mosques that choose to implement a vaccine mandate or credentials policy for congregants, to be permitted the following, 2 to 4 weeks later:

- No capacity restrictions except by building code, with no physical distancing during active prayers or worship. Physical distancing is still maintained before and after worship.
- Prayer mats are no longer required.
- Other measures will continue to be reinforced, including universal masking at all times, screening for symptoms or exposures upon entry and registration of all attendees.

Rationale:

1. Consistency and alignment of policies between different segments of society, with reduced conflicts due to more restrictions in houses of worship vs. sports venues, restaurants and gyms.
2. Businesses and institutions such as schools and hospitals with vaccine mandates have increased in-person attendance and service provision.
3. Houses of worship are providers of essential services, but not everyone has been able to return due to physical distancing limitations. Uncapped capacity will allow maximal community

members to benefit and worship more normally. The above recommendations will be widely welcomed by religious institutions and community members alike.

4. The fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario has plateaued.
5. As part of the “Last Mile” vaccination strategy, this policy will likely encourage the implementation of vaccine credentials at houses of worship even without an explicit government mandate, and subsequently vaccination rates within communities.
6. The official provincial vaccine credentialing system with an enhanced certificate is now available, facilitating the safe and authorised implementation of a vaccine mandate.
7. As we head into winter, houses of worship remain critical pillars for mental health wellbeing for community members.
8. Gathering sizes, and therefore risk, are typically much smaller than with tens of thousands in attendance at large capacity venues.
9. Unlike at sports arenas, gyms and restaurants where masks may be temporarily removed, universal masking is maintained as a critical safety measure.
10. Removal of requirements for prayer mats, a context-specific measure we advocated for earlier in the pandemic, reflects the accepted primary transmission of SARS-CoV-2 via aerosols rather than fomite spread. Further, the risk is negligible with a universal masking policy in place.
11. Physical distancing requirements are only requested to be removed for a brief period that is a much shorter and safer duration of possible exposure than other settings.
12. The 2 to 4 week delay in lifting capacity restrictions after implementation of a vaccine credentials policy allows organizations and community members to become accustomed to new entry processes and credential requirements.
13. During congregatory prayers, typically only the Imam is reciting the Qur’an aloud, while facing away from those praying behind him. There is no regular singing or chanting by all those in attendance, besides saying “Ameen” a couple of times, which can be said while masked.
14. We are actively working to support mosques to improve their ventilation through the provision of portable HEPA air purifiers, thereby providing an additional layer of protection.

Your timely leadership and direction in this matter is much appreciated. Thank you for your time and consideration and we look forward to your expedient response.

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Co-Chairs, Canadian Muslim COVID-19 Task Force (CMCTF)