

July 18, 2020

Joint Statement: Alberta Health Service and the Hutterian Safety Council response to guide Hutterite communities through the COVID-19 pandemic

The Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH), Alberta Health Services (AHS), and the Hutterian Safety Council (HSC) are working collaboratively, and with counterparts in Saskatchewan*, to help guide Hutterite communities through the COVID-19 pandemic. The HSC includes Hutterite spiritual leaders, educators, volunteer firefighters, safety instructors, and medical first responders. These councillors are strong volunteers who serve their local communities without reservation.

Since the pandemic began in March, the Hutterian Safety Council established the COVID-19 Safety Taskforce which has joined the efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19 by producing region-specific bulletins advising Hutterite communities to reduce communal gatherings sizes, to follow physical distancing guidelines, to implement proper hygiene practices in all aspects of their communities, and to fully comply with provincial health orders. Many of these bulletins have been graciously hosted by the Hutterite Health website (www.hutteritehealth.com/bulletins). AHS Public Health teams have worked closely with many Hutterite communities to support them in implementing these protective measures.

In the past several weeks, there have been several cases identified in Hutterite communities in various parts of Alberta and additional cases are being investigated. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize that we are linked through our common humanity, our common susceptibility to disease and sickness. However, we are also aware that stigmatizing individuals or peoples can rapidly cause division and conflict.

In the spirit of openness, HSC wishes to acknowledge that there have been challenges getting some Hutterite communities to implement adequate COVID-19 protocols and to abide by the public health orders. Although most communities adapted with care and managed well, the transition was more challenging for others.

Many Hutterites feel their communities are isolated and thus insulated. This creates a false sense of security in the face of the COVID-19 risk, and HSC continues to work at dispelling this notion. While the remoteness and the separateness of our communities can be beneficial, it does not eliminate the risk of the virus entering our communities.

Further, we recognize that Hutterite communities are an integral part of the local food network and economy. Since cases have been detected on multiple Hutterite communities, the unfortunate misunderstanding has taken root that positive COVID-19 tests would lead to an economic shutdown of their communities. As a result, AHS experienced some resistance to COVID-19 testing at some Hutterite communities. While the vast majority embraced the guidance provided by AHS and HSC, a small group has resisted intervention. This is regrettable, but also not wholly unexpected for a group of diverse people spread over a vast political and geographical area. Like the rest of society, Hutterite communities feel the impact of disrupted routines and tradition caused by the need to adapt to public health orders. The Hutterian Safety Council, in collaboration with AHS, has facilitated communications with these and many other Hutterite communities in order to allay their fears and encourage leaders to work together with public health officials.

We wish to thank all those communities that continue to take the COVID-19 situation seriously and are acting accordingly. Much progress has been made, and communities that were lax in implementing proper COVID-19 protocols are now participating in training, education, and testing. Strict protocols have been put in place on impacted colonies including self-isolation and additional hygiene practices. Members are committed to eradicating the virus in their communities and to ensure that it does not spread to the surrounding communities.

AHS would like to thank the leadership of communities that are experiencing COVID-19 cases for their support to contain the virus. This is the only way to retain consumer confidence and expedite the recovery of the Alberta economy.

While it's natural to be concerned about COVID-19 and its potential impact on family or community, it is not helpful to stigmatize those who are getting tested or who test positive. We all live in various communities that are defined by unique borders. These borders are useful in organizing our provincial, rural, or urban lives but make no difference whatsoever in the natural world. The coronavirus affects all our communities and as such we share a common responsibility to support each other through these challenging times. Activities that single out or create unfair biases between neighbours and our unique communities are contrary to the spirits of unity, kindness, and generosity that define our province.

Unity and solidarity will empower us to face this crisis together and compel us to have deeper compassion and understanding so that we build safer and more resilient communities in this great province.

In summary, the CMOH, AHS and the Hutterian Safety Council are committed to building and strengthening intercommunity and interprovincial relationships that will create safer and healthier communities that minimize the impact of COVID-19 for everyone.

*This statement was adapted from a joint statement put out earlier this month in Saskatchewan, as there are many similarities, and lessons learned, between the two provinces.