

The Honourable Jason Kenney
Premier of Alberta
307 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton AB T5K 2B6

August 4, 2021

EZMSA Office
Suite 201 12315 Stony Plain Road NW
Edmonton, AB
T5N 3Y8

Re: Removal of COVID-19 Public Health Measures and Discontinuing Testing Sites

Dear Premier Kenney:

We are gravely concerned about Alberta's plan to systematically and precipitously remove the remaining public health measures to control COVID-19 and to eliminate testing for mild cases of COVID-19. Like you and all Albertans, we wish that the pandemic would end. However, despite recent statements by Minister Shandro and Dr. Hinshaw, we are still in the midst of a pandemic. There are repetitive waves of COVID-19 variants moving around the world and we have not yet reached a safe state with a constant low level of virus in our community. We have a sequence of four separate pandemics, caused by variants, each with different clinical implications, transmissibility, and varying abilities to escape vaccine protection.

Recent data shows that Alberta now has one of the highest number of active cases in Canada. The R_t is the highest it has been throughout the pandemic at 1.5. New cases are doubling every week. The removal of the face masking mandate on public transit in mid-August combined with the return to school in early September without any mask mandate will further accelerate the rate of delta (B.1.617.2) variant spread. Even though vaccination decreases the number of seriously ill patients who require hospitalization, without testing or mitigation strategies, markedly higher numbers of new cases could still result in overloading the hospital system and will certainly result in high numbers of cases in those who have not been or are not eligible for vaccination.

A recent study has shown that, even in individuals with asymptomatic delta variant infections, the viral load is over 1,000 times higher than the previous alpha (B.1.1.7) variant. In addition,



studies have found that asymptomatic fully vaccinated people have high viral loads and can very effectively transmit the delta variant. It is now evident that the delta variant is one of the most transmissible viruses, exceeding that of Ebola, Bird Flu and Influenza. It is at the same transmissible level as the chickenpox virus, with only the measles virus more infective. Based on this, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States now advises all individuals, even those who are vaccinated, to wear masks in public areas indoors in states with high numbers of active cases. Once the delta variant becomes established, it rapidly spreads to infect much higher percentages of unvaccinated people and fully vaccinated immunosuppressed people than previous variants.

We recognize the efficacy of vaccines against COVID-19 in preventing serious illness in vaccinated individuals. We strongly encourage the government to use reasonable strategies and incentives to increase the immunization rates because the delta variant is extraordinarily efficient at infecting unvaccinated people. Unfortunately, the recent rapid increase in active cases in Alberta indicates that we are in the early stage of an advancing fourth wave. It may result in high numbers of active cases in the 660,000 unvaccinated children under 12 years of age and the 1,500,000 Albertans over 12 years of age who are not yet vaccinated. The delta variant is causing comparable surges in countries with rates of vaccination similar to Alberta, such as Israel, the United Kingdom and also in states in the southern United States such as Arkansas, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana and Missouri. Unvaccinated adults, with an average age in their forties, are filling adult intensive care units in those states.

Pediatric intensive care units (PICU) in Arkansas and Oklahoma are now overwhelmed with serious infections in children. Not only are children at risk of developing severe COVID-19 pneumonia, but they are at risk of becoming critically ill from Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C), weeks following what seemed initially to be a mild COVID-19 infection. Although it is relatively rare for children to become seriously ill with COVID-19, there are only 47 PICU beds in Alberta, which already operate at 100% occupancy, and would be overwhelmed in the event of a large number of serious illnesses in children occurring in the midst of widespread school and community related infections. We note that you have also received a letter from our colleagues with the Canadian Pediatric Society expressing their grave concerns regarding the effects on children from removing the public health measures. The letter presses for a reversal of the Alberta government's July 28th announcements.

By virtue of infecting a larger proportion of the unvaccinated population, a fourth wave due to the delta variant will also result in high numbers of people developing the chronic disabling symptoms of long COVID. This occurs in both children and in adults and can be profoundly disabling for months.

We are particularly concerned that your government's plans (discontinuing testing people with mild symptoms and most contact tracing) do not follow guidelines from Health Canada, the CDC or the World Health Organization. Similar to the view expressed by the Alberta Medical Association, we are concerned with the rapid speed of these changes and that you have provided no scientific data to Albertans to justify these unprecedented actions. In particular, we believe that the elimination of assessment centres and testing will not only place Albertans



at risk, but will place Alberta and Canada in a situation where our public health data will be viewed as unreliable with potential negative implications for Alberta tourism and for Albertans travelling to other destinations.

We firmly recommend the following actions be taken to correct the July 28th announcement:

1. reverse the actions announced on July 28th that abandoned the test, trace, isolate as a COVID-19 control strategy;
2. continue the current public health measures until you have conducted a review of the most recent data on 1) the delta variant's infectious dose, ability to infect and transmission by fully vaccinated individuals; and 2) the evidence behind the reintroduction of masking mandates by the CDC;
3. do not modify the current public health measures until the evidence and modelling from that review are publicly presented and discussed with the people of Alberta; and
4. provide public indicators that will need to be achieved before further weakening of COVID-19 control measures are taken, e.g.:
 - a. vaccines are available for children under 12 years of age (these will likely be available within six months);
 - b. at least 85% of the total population of Alberta have been completely immunized; and
 - c. Health Canada has declared the COVID-19 pandemic to be over and recommends that public health measures be wound down.

Sincerely,

Dr. Noel Gibney, Co-Chair, Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee
Dr. James Talbot, Co-Chair, Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee
Dr. Cheryl Mack, Vice President, Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association
Dr. Ernst Schuster, Past President, Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association
Dr. Scott Beach, President, Calgary Zone Medical Staff Association
Dr. Tehseen Ladha, Member, Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee
Dr. Hernando Leon, Member, Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee
Dr. Shazma Mithani, Member, Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee
Dr. Peter Laratta, Member, Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee
Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowich, Member, Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee

And other members of Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee.

CC: Hon. Tyler Shandro, Minister, Alberta Health
Mr. Paul Wynnyk, Deputy Minister, Alberta Health
Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Alberta Health
Dr. Erika McIntyre, President, EZMSA
Dr. Paul Boucher, President, Alberta Medical Association