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Business Needs for Future Public Health Emergencies

As Canada prepares to enter the post-pandemic era, businesses want to see the lessons learned acted upon for future public health emergencies. This includes updating outdated guidance and ensuring that governments at all levels utilize every appropriate tool before resorting to lockdown measures. Doing so will help avoid unnecessary and damaging economic disruption in future public health emergencies.

I. Travel protocols

During COVID-19, Canada's travel sector was severely impacted as public health conditions led to drastic measures being taken by governments. However, the evolution of policy during the pandemic showed the imperative of having a plan to facilitate safe travel, rather than resorting to broad-based shutdowns.

The business community recommends the following measures to governments as they develop a long-term, standardized approach to safe travel during future public health emergencies:

1. **Develop a range of testing protocols to enable safe travel to continue during public health emergencies.** Canada did not fully use all testing options available during the pandemic, including using rapid antigen testing in place of PCR tests where appropriate. The protocols need to reflect the multitude of testing options available. In addition, they should be updated as increased research leads to progress on rapid testing for viruses other than coronavirus.
2. **Set clear border entry requirements for vaccinated and non-vaccinated travellers, including regarding the role of testing and proof of health credentials across all points of entry.** As COVID-19 demonstrated, contradictory policies create confusion for travellers and cause bottlenecks at points of entry.
3. **Ensure a standardized, internationally-recognized national digital health credential is available across Canada.** Such a platform will provide an infrastructure that can be established quickly when future public health emergencies occur.
4. **Ensure international alignment on protocols and requirements, including testing.** This step should include incorporating best practices from other jurisdictions that have standardized digital health credentials, alignment on approved vaccines for travel, testing (including standardized timeframes), and compatible entry requirements (such as with those in the EU and Asia). This measure will facilitate seamless international travel during future public health emergencies.

II. Increased harmonization of policies and regulations across provincial boundaries

Canada's COVID-19 pandemic response was plagued by confusing and contradictory messages and protocols from various levels of government. This incoherence was costly and frustrating for businesses, especially those operating in several jurisdictions within Canada.

Significantly increased coordination among the different levels of government is needed for future emergencies, including clear national guidance from the federal government.

To avoid a patchwork of restrictions in future crises, the government should do the following:

1. **Public health protocols must be data-driven, science-based, and consistent across the country. Misinformation needs to be more effectively countered.**
During COVID-19, lockdown criteria varied widely across provinces, as well as among different sectors and sizes of businesses. The federal government must be the leader in setting the national standards against which provincial protocols will be designed. Data needs to be at the centre of all protocols, and allow for full transparency. Governments at all levels must also do more to combat the spread of misinformation during public health emergencies.
2. **We require uniform and consistent policies regarding rapid tests.** If rapid testing is available during future public health emergencies, Canada needs to better incorporate the use of these tests in workplaces across the country to help avoid or shorten lockdowns.

III. Future workplace health and safety guidance

Businesses want to implement public health measures to protect employees and customers, but the ever-changing nature of guidance can make it overwhelming for businesses to follow.

Preparation and planning for future crises

As noted above, Canada needs to formulate a standardized approach for dealing with national crises in the future.

Together with the provinces and territories, the federal government should convene a National Emergency Planning Committee to model various national scale emergencies, including pandemics, natural disasters, and cybersecurity attacks. This data should inform planning at the national level to address different scenarios and the resources needed by businesses and reduce inconsistencies as were seen during COVID-19. The committee should include a variety of stakeholders at the table, including medical and business communities.



Access to personal protective equipment and other critical supplies

Access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was a significant challenge for businesses during the early stages of the pandemic. To avoid a similar scenario in future emergencies, the business community recommends the following actions:

1. **Develop plans for how Canada's manufacturing sector will pivot to produce required PPE and other related supplies in the event of a public health emergency.** These plans need to account for both health sector PPE and business-use PPE, and other necessary supplies such as ventilators.
2. **Develop emergency PPE and other supply stockpiles that can be quickly established and accessed by businesses during a national emergency.** These stockpiles must be centralized and easily accessible by all businesses in Canada. These supplies should be separate from and additional to resources for the health sector.
3. **Develop a library of public health emergency resources for businesses, especially resource-strapped small businesses.** The library should include disaster-planning manuals, training services, and a general response handbook. These resources should complement government emergency plans and include guidance on how changes in conditions (e.g., the emergence of variants) will affect business operations.

Future role of vaccination status

COVID-19 has significantly changed the expectation of the public and employers concerning disclosure of personal health information. While this evolution has occurred naturally during the pandemic, a significant amount of legal uncertainty remains in relation to what employers can expect of employees for vaccinations in the future.

To alleviate this uncertainty, the business community recommends to government:

1. **Any future vaccine mandates need to be clear and standardized across Canada.** Businesses need to know their obligations, what they can require, and in what situations. There should not be a piecemeal approach regarding how long vaccine passports are in place, what metrics are used to lift the mandates, and what workplaces can mandate as a condition of employment.
2. **Governments need to clearly define the difference between private rights and public interest to ensure that businesses are not left in legal limbo.** Legal certainty needs to be provided to businesses on what they can and/or are legally obligated to do to uphold workplace safety. They require leadership from the federal and provincial governments through clear legislation.



Protect our critical infrastructure from cyber attacks

Cyber attacks on our critical infrastructure, hospitals, research institutions and businesses spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic, and government agencies have issued repeated warnings about the increased risk of cyber attacks to Canada's healthcare system. Canada must make the necessary investments to strengthen the cyber resilience of our hospitals, critical infrastructure and businesses to prevent these attacks during future public emergencies.

To that end, the business community recommends to government:

1. **Encourage investment in cybersecurity before attacks happen** by helping critical infrastructure operators and businesses of all sizes develop enterprise cybersecurity strategies to prevent cyber attacks. These plans should also encourage entities to develop robust cyber response plans and threat information-sharing mechanisms. In addition, they should promote the continuous updating of cybersecurity plans to align with cybersecurity best practices and global standards. The government should also provide funding support to assist investments in cybersecurity by critical infrastructure operators.
2. **Support public-private partnerships that facilitate better threat information-sharing** in a way that builds mutual trust and enables threat information to be shared between businesses and government in a timely, confidential, and actionable manner.

IV. Initiate an independent review of lessons learned

COVID-19 was an unprecedented global public health crisis that cost millions of lives and had a disastrous impact on economies around the world. While the struggle to manage the public health impacts of COVID in Canada is not over, it is clear that a review of the country's handling of the crisis will be a critical tool for preparing for future crises. The point of the review should not be to assign blame, but to evaluate what went right and what went wrong, and to identify measures that will help us avoid or mitigate future crises.

The review must be objective, independent, and arms-length from government, with findings fully available to the public. Furthermore, the review must be comprehensive and include a variety of stakeholders from the business community, among others, at the leadership table. The business community must play a significant part in the process to ensure that lessons learned are captured and recommendations for future crises take into account the needs and best practices of Canada's business community and the Canadians they employ.