

Reopening Ontario For Business: Guiding Principles Announced



On April 27, 2020, the Government of Ontario (Government) unveiled its framework of “guiding principles” for a gradual, staged approach to loosening its emergency COVID-19 measures and reopening Ontario’s economy. The framework does not include specific timelines by which any steps will be taken. Rather, timing will be driven by public health advice based on a range of observable criteria, including the rate of virus spread and containment, health system capacity, public health system capacity and incidence tracking capacity. As part of the gradual approach to reopening the economy, the Government has made clear that workplace safety will be a top priority.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR ONTARIO WORKPLACES

Broadly, there are three phases of Ontario’s COVID-19 response: the “protect,” “restart” and “recover” phases. The Government is planning a stage-by-stage approach within the “restart” phase, as follows:

Stage 1: Select workplaces which were ordered to close or restrict operations may be permitted to reopen. These workplaces must be able to immediately meet’or modify operations to meet’public health guidelines and occupational health and safety requirements.

Stage 2: Additional workplaces “with significant mitigation plans” may be reopened based on risk assessments. These workplaces may include those in certain service, office and retail industries.

Stage 3: Reopening all workplaces “responsibly” will be considered.

Public health officials will monitor each stage for two to four weeks, as they assess the evolution of the COVID-19 outbreak to determine if it is necessary to change course. They will be looking for a consistent decrease in the number of new daily COVID-19 cases observed, and adequate health care, contact tracing and testing capacities must be available, before progressing to any subsequent stage. Throughout each stage, businesses can expect that there will be continued protections for vulnerable populations, and that practices such as physical distancing, hand washing and respiratory hygiene will continue to be in place.

Specific details on the types of businesses that will be able to reopen during these stages have not yet been announced. However, the ability of a workplace to implement effective protective and preventative measures will be a critical consideration.

The Government has stated that workplaces must have a plan promoting adherence to strict hygiene, sanitation and physical distancing standards in order to reopen. It announced that it will be developing guidelines, training and other resources to assist employers with the task of safely reopening their businesses. While details and timing of these resources have not yet been provided, Ontario's framework indicates that these resources "will build on the guidelines provided to essential workplaces," which currently remain open.

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