

Canada's Nunavut Territory reports first Omicron death one day after lifting lockdown measures

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Nunavut, a majority Inuit-populated territory located in Canada's far north, reported its first death from the highly infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 on Tuesday. The announcement came just one day after Nunavut's government ended the territory-wide anti-COVID lockdown it had imposed in late December due to a surge in infections.

Community travel restrictions have been lifted, indoor gatherings of up to five people from other households are now allowed, and all nonessential businesses have been permitted to reopen. The government has also announced the reopening of schools for in-person learning starting January 24 and reduced the isolation period for those who contract COVID-19 from 10 to just seven days.

The federal Liberal government has demonstrated indifference as Omicron has surged in the territory, ignoring calls for assistance for several weeks. Only on Tuesday did Ottawa respond to the request for help and with a largely superficial gesture, deploying three nurses and nine contact tracers to the massive but sparsely populated territory. These numbers are wholly inadequate to address the growing Omicron wave in a territory blighted by some of the worst poverty and poorest infrastructure anywhere in the country.

The territorial government, for its part, is pushing full steam ahead with reopening. The official government web page for information on the coronavirus showcases the slogan "Nunavut's Path: Living with COVID-19," further underscoring its cavalier attitude to the social misery and death brought on by the pandemic. Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Michael Patterson dismissed any possibility that the province would return to lockdown, even as the territory has seen its highest case

numbers in over a year. During an address on January 5, Premier P.J. Akeegok cited 244 COVID-19 cases across 12 Nunavut communities. "We have never had this many cases of COVID-19 in our territory," he stated. Official case figures show a high-water mark of 297 cases on January 8.

The decision to implement a reckless back-to-work and back-to-school policy has been justified by government officials on the basis that the caseload has declined. According to Patterson, there are now more people recovering from COVID-19 than testing positive. The new infection numbers are likely far higher than the official figures indicate, however, because the territory has ceased testing in communities where COVID-19 has already been detected. Moreover, while the total number of active cases had reached a low of 128 on January 13, they have since risen sharply, reaching 195 yesterday, indicating that another wave of infections, potentially worse than the last, is underway.

The government's "reopening" decisions come at the same time as vaccination efforts have been "paused" in numerous communities across the territory, due to a lack of medical personnel. During a press conference on January 13, Nunavut Health Minister John Main stated, "As it sits today, on the human resources front, we're still waiting for a response from our federal partners." Staffing shortages have also led to a broader strain on health care in the territory as a whole. There are now 10 Nunavut communities with health centres that can only provide emergency services.

The decision to reverse lockdown measures in the territory will have disastrous consequences. Despite official declarations that cases are on the decline,

Canada's Omicron surge, which has seen daily infection rates four times higher than in any of the previous four pandemic waves, is far from over. Federal modeling released on January 14 by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) warned that daily new cases could reach 170,000 by February even if all the limited health restrictions then in place remained in force.

The report also warned that the Omicron variant will result in "extremely high levels" of hospitalization in the coming weeks. That forecast has already been borne out, with both Ontario and Quebec seeing more people hospitalized with COVID-19 this week than ever before. Deaths are also rising sharply, averaging around 150 per day over the past seven days, and reaching a peak of 212 yesterday.

In Nunavut, where limited resources are already stretched threadbare, such conditions could result in widespread infrastructural collapse and numerous fatalities.

In communities within the territory that are affected by the vaccination pause, the coming surge poses even greater risks. Lack of adequate housing will exacerbate the spread of the virus in vulnerable communities, where large numbers of people are forced to live in close quarters with nowhere else to isolate during the lengthy Arctic winter. Many communities are also affected by food insecurity due to exorbitant prices. As a result, significant numbers of people are malnourished and thus more vulnerable to infection and transmission.

Making matters worse, the territory has suffered numerous tuberculosis (TB) outbreaks over a period of decades, putting significant numbers of people at risk for severe COVID-19 cases. In 2018, the federal government committed to ending TB among the Inuit population by 2030. But after just two years of effort, progress was officially stalled in January 2020 due to lack of funding. Rates of tuberculosis among the Inuit are 300 times higher than those observed in non-Indigenous, Canadian-born citizens. In Pangnirtung, a community of 1,400, another TB outbreak has taken hold in the midst of the Omicron surge. Health care workers, dealing with problems of understaffing, have had to entirely shift their focus to addressing COVID-19 at the expense of their efforts to combat TB. "Once COVID came, we totally lost track of the TB

stuff," the town's mayor said.

It is because Nunavut's population is so vulnerable that public health authorities implemented strict travel controls and social distancing in grocery stores and other places at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. Only in November 2020, when Canada was in the midst of a ruinous second wave produced by the profits-before-lives back-to-work/back-to-school policy of the capitalist establishment, did Nunavut record its first-ever COVID-19 case. By December the territory was in the grip of a major outbreak.

Nunavut's Omicron-fueled pandemic surge will likely cause the greatest number of infections in Iqaluit, the territorial capital and its largest town, whose residents currently do not have access to clean water. Fuel oil was detected in the city water supply this week for the second time after its initial discovery in October, prompting yet another do-not-consume order. For the time being, residents must gather water for drinking, cooking and washing themselves from the Sylvia Grinnell River—which will be impossible for those currently isolating. Government officials have dismissed calls for an independent inquiry into the water crisis.



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