COVID-19 Guidelines for Faith Organizations

December 21, 2021

1.0 Introduction

Due to the arrival of the Omicron variant and the current epidemiology in Nova Scotia, additional provincewide restrictions are in effect as of 12:01 a.m. December 22, 2021. While there is no end date, it's intended to be a short-term measure to protect Nova Scotians and our health system while more is learned how this new variant behaves and vaccination coverage increases.

These guidelines are intended to help faith organizations understand their obligations under the Health Protection Act Order regarding physical distance, gathering limits, proof of full vaccination and masks. They also include some recommendations for safety during this period of high cases and the presence of the Omicron variant.

2.0 General precautions

- Everyone should continue sensible precautions that have been helping us all stay safe. Key precautions include:
  - Get vaccinated. It is our best defence against COVID-19.
  - Stay home if you feel sick or have symptoms of COVID-19.
  - Follow physical distance, gathering limits, proof of full vaccination and mask requirements in all aspects of life.
  - Maintain healthy habits like clean hands, cough and sneeze etiquette, and regular cleaning and disinfecting, especially high-touch surfaces.
- Workplaces should view COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses hazards to be mitigated under occupational health and safety legislation.

3.0 Physical distance

- People must stay at least 2 metres/6 feet apart indoors and outdoors. This includes people attending regular faith services and other activities hosted by faith organizations.
- However, people who are from the same household or consistent social group of up to 10 people do not have to distance from each other.
- People should choose their group based on who they plan to socialize with over the holidays and keep their group consistent. These are the people who you do all your socializing with. A group of 10 random people cannot be together without physical distance.
- This consistent group of up to 10 people can be closer wherever they are – at home, in congregations for faith services, at gatherings, at restaurants, dancing together at a bar, etc – as long as they are distanced from any other people or groups.
- However, they need to wear masks if they are in an indoor public place and provide proof of full vaccination for discretionary activities.

4.0 Gathering limits

4.1 Informal gathering limit

- When a gathering or event is not hosted by a recognized business or organization, it is an informal gathering.
- Informal gatherings must follow the informal gathering limit of 10 people from the same household or consistent social group, indoors or outdoors. These are typically gatherings at a person's home.
- Physical distance, masks and proof of full vaccination are not required.
- Indoor and outdoor informal wedding ceremonies and informal faith services, typically at home, are limited to 10 people from the same household or consistent social group, plus one officiant.
- If a faith organization holds activities at someone's home, it is an informal gathering because the homeowner is hosting the gathering – not the organization. However, these informal gatherings at home are currently limited to people from the same household or consistent social group. This may mean that you aren't able to host some of your usual activities at someone's home for a little while.
- Even if a business like a caterer or event planner supports your event at home, the informal gathering limit applies.

4.2 Formal gathering limits

- When recognized businesses and organization host gatherings and events, they must follow the formal gathering limits. Faith organizations are considered recognized organizations that must follow these limits for regular faith services and other events and activities.
- The formal gathering limit is 25% of a room or venue's capacity to a maximum of 50 indoors or outdoors
- This means if your facility or space normally holds 100 people, then your limit is 25 (because that is 50% of capacity). If it normally holds 300, your limit is 50 (because that is the maximum).
- Faith organizations with large venues that have a previously approved plan to accommodate multiple but fully separated groups can re-implement it. However, there is a limit of 50 people per group and the total number of people must be within 25% of the venue's legal maximum capacity.
- The formal gathering limit applies to regular faith services and many other activities that faith organizations may host. Currently, sports events, festivals, special events like receptions and conferences, and in-person performances are not permitted. Other formal events that are allowed and where the formal gathering limit applies include:
  - weddings ceremonies (but not receptions)
  - funeral ceremonies and visitation (but not receptions)
  - events like a wedding ceremony held in a rental facility
- The recognized business or organization must have a plan and take on responsibility for ensuring public health measures are followed.
- Physical distance is required, except among people from the same household or consistent social group of up to 10.
- Typically, these types of gatherings are held in indoor public places where masks are required. See more details in Section 5.0 of this document.
- Most gatherings hosted by a recognized business or organization (including faith organizations) require people to provide proof of full vaccination, even if they are also following gathering limits.

5.0 Proof of full vaccination

Even when gathering limits are being followed, proof of full vaccination is required for discretionary activities, including most events and activities hosted by faith organizations. There are limited exceptions. The proof of full vaccination protocol includes links to resources to help businesses and organizations with checking for proof.

5.1 Regular faith services

- Proof of full vaccination is not required for a regular faith service, such as daily or weekly services. Services that are part of your faith's annual calendar (such as Christmas and Easter services in Christian faiths) are considered the same as regular daily/weekly services – no proof of full vaccination is required.
- If a faith organization holds multiple regular or special services in a single day, they are encouraged to consider making one or more of the services for vaccinated people only to accommodate people who require or are seeking a greater level of safety and to decrease overall exposure risks.

5.2 Events and activities

- Proof of full vaccination is required for other events and activities hosted by a faith organization, which may include but are not limited to:
  - social time after a service
  - bible study
  - youth group
  - retreats
  - community meals, fundraisers or meetings
  - holiday concerts (not held during regular faith services)
  - special events
  - activities and events held in rental spaces
  - when people rent/use the church's facilities (like a hall or other rooms) for events like a wedding reception or leisure activities/clubs like quilting or book club

Please note that, as per section 4.2, some of these types of gatherings are not currently permitted at all.

5.3 Weddings, funerals and other religious ceremonies

- Proof of full vaccination is required for participants at weddings, funerals and other ceremonies – even if they take place in a church or other faith facility. It is not required for officiants, funeral home staff or service providers such as wedding planners or photographers because they are effectively in their workplace. Informal weddings as outlined in section 4.1 do not require proof of full vaccination.
- There is an exception for funeral services with a maximum of 10 participants indoors or outdoors (not including officiants or funeral home staff):
  - Proof of full vaccination is not required.
  - Everyone must wear masks, indoors or outdoors.
  - Physical distance is required, except among people from the same household or consistent social group of up to 10.
- Proof of full vaccination is required for receptions and visitation associated with weddings and funerals (including funerals with a maximum of 10).

5.4 Services for vulnerable populations

- Proof of full vaccination is not required for people accessing the following services or for employees providing them, but it is required for volunteers. This applies whether a faith organization is directly offering these services or providing space for them:
  - Mental health and addictions support groups
  - Programs, services for vulnerable populations
  - Food bank services
  - Shelters
  - Meal programs for vulnerable populations (including dine-in)

5.5 Faith organization operations

- Proof of full vaccination is not required for officiants or employees of a business or organization (including faith organizations) but it is required for volunteers.
- Proof of full vaccination isn't required for business meetings in the workplace when they involve people who regularly work together and where the general public is not present (unless they're held in a rental space).
- If a singer or organist needs to practice for a regular service and if people need to clean or prepare the place of worship for regular services, proof of full vaccination is not required.

6.0 Masks

- Masks continue to be required in **indoor public places**. Places of worship, rental facilities, places for events and other spaces typically owned or used by faith organizations are considered indoor public places.
- Masks are required throughout faith services and other events and activities hosted by faith organizations, whether people are seated or not.
- With the reintroduction of physical distance, masks are mandatory again in areas of private indoor workplaces where physical distance cannot be maintained, as well as in all common areas, areas where there is interaction with the public, and areas with poor ventilation.
- Masks can be removed and then put back on if you're:
  - doing a physical activity that's difficult in a mask, like a fitness class
  - actively eating or drinking (ie not nursing a drink throughout an event or activity) and you must be seated to eat or drink
  - giving a performance as a singer or playing a wind instrument (such as a soloist)
  - public speaking or officiating
  - having formal photos taken, like an ID photo, wedding photos, or a session with a photographer
  - confirming your identify
  - in a courtroom, jury room or secured area in a courthouse
- While people with a valid medical reason for not wearing a mask need to be accommodated, these valid medical reasons are infrequent and this should not be a reason for significant numbers of people in a single congregation to be unmasked. Supporting the use of this medical exception when it's not valid is inappropriate.
- Both you as an organization and the people who attend your services and activities have a responsibility to ensure mask rules are followed and can face compliance action for violations.

6.0 Restrictions and recommendations for singing

- Due to the highly infectious nature of the Omicron variant, congregational singing is not permitted at this time. Choirs and other groups of singers are not permitted. Singing can only be performed by one singer.
- Consider alternatives to live singing such as recordings instead of a live singer. Conduct rehearsals or performances online as much as possible.
- As per physical distancing requirements, maintain 2 metres/6 feet between the soloist and the congregation.
- Shorten performances and have more scheduled breaks.
- Avoid singing in closed, unventilated rooms. Improve ventilation by moving singing outside if possible. When inside, larger rooms are preferred.If possible, open windows and exterior doors to improve air flow.
- Avoid using portable fans that disperse contaminated air around a room. Appropriate mechanical ventilation can help dilute indoor air with clean outdoor air.
- While wearing a mask while singing is not required for a soloist, it is recommended if possible to help block the movement of droplets and aerosols. Learn more about how to choose an acceptable mask.

7.0 Resources

Nova Scotia coronavirus website

COVID-19 Protocol for Proof of Full Vaccination for Events and Activities

Proof of full vaccination guide for businesses and organizations

Proof of full vaccination required poster

Maximum occupancy poster

Wearing a mask poster

Healthy habits poster

Handwashing poster