



Emergency Management in Ontario—Pandemic Response

2020 Special Report

Why We Did This Audit

- In our 2017 audit *Emergency Management in Ontario*, we found that the province was not adequately prepared for an emergency.
- While we were conducting our continuous follow-up report this year, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Ontario. We decided to expand our follow-up work to assess the Provincial Emergency Management Office (EMO)'s involvement in the province's response to COVID-19. This included looking at pandemic lessons learned that can be applied to improve future EMO response.

Why It Matters

- Weaknesses in the emergency management programs across the province and in EMO's oversight and co-ordination of emergency management programs could make Ontario even more vulnerable in a large-scale emergency.
- One of the critical objectives for the timely implementation of our recommendations from 2017 was for the province to be better prepared for the possibility of a major emergency, which occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic.

What We Found

- Almost three years after we issued our recommendations, only four or 11% of 36 recommended actions that the Ministry of the Solicitor General was responsible for have been implemented. This Ministry oversees EMO.
- The Ministry of Health is the designated lead for COVID-19 because under the Order-in-Council that designates responsibilities for emergencies, it is responsible for human health, disease and epidemic emergencies. However, the Ministry of the Solicitor General is the lead for "any emergency that requires the co-ordination of provincial emergency management." Given that COVID-19 was a provincially declared emergency, EMO should have taken on a much more prominent role in the emergency response.
- Given the significant changeover in leadership at EMO, outdated emergency response plans and the lack of sufficient staff, when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Ontario, the province was not in a position to activate the provincial response structure in its emergency response plan. Instead, it hired an external consultant to create a new governance structure. In contrast to Ontario, other provinces activated their existing response structures and emergency plans. The new provincial governance structure did not give EMO a prominent role.
- Under legislation, the main governance body of emergency management in Ontario is the Cabinet Committee on Emergency Management (CCEM), which is to consist of eight MPPs and the Premier. The CCEM had not met for several years until November 2019, for an introductory meeting. The CCEM in this form met just three times during the first wave of the pandemic. The meetings were mostly updates, no minutes were taken and there is no record of any decisions made.
- EMO had only eight field officer staff, who were already burdened with the duties assigned to them and that prevented them from fulfilling their responsibility of supporting Ontario's 444 municipalities. Field officer staffing was 50% higher in Alberta and 360% higher in British Columbia.
- The province's state of readiness for an emergency still needs significant improvement due to lacking a strategy for surge staffing; no agreements in place for resources such as personal protective equipment; outdated response plans; and a lack of recent practice tests conducted for emergency response plans. These shortcomings impacted the province's emergency response for the pandemic.

Conclusions

- Ontario's capability and capacity to rapidly and effectively respond to the COVID-19 emergency would have been significantly more supported by EMO had proactive and preparatory improvements been made to the province's emergency management plans, policies and procedures in recent years, including implementing our 2017 audit recommendations.