

Corporate Communications Annual Report 2023

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Prepared By: Chuck Ferguson, Communications Manager

Approved By: David Kingma, MBA, MA, CHRE
Vice President, Human Resources & Corporate Services

Submitted By & Signature: *Original signed document on file.*
Dr. Nicola J. Mercer, MD, MBA, MPH, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health & CEO

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Corporate Communications leads Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health's (WDG Public Health or the Agency) compliance with the communications components of the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS).¹
- The report highlights the shift from predominantly COVID-19 communication to engaging community members on a wide range of programs, services and resources offered by the Agency.
- Key to WDG Public Health Communications strategy is adjusting to the changing media and social media landscapes to continue to reach and engage a larger, more diverse, post-pandemic audience.
- Communications continues to engage frequently with local media outlets on current public health topics; the Agency's social media audience continues to grow (36,000 followers) and engage (17% engagement rate); and the website attracted 150 percent more views in 2023 than pre-pandemic (2019).

Background

Corporate Communications (“Communications”) encompasses communications and library functions and provides services to both internal and external partners. Communications:

- Leads the Agency’s compliance with the Communication components of the Ontario Public Health Foundational Standard of Effective Public Health Practice in the area of Research, Knowledge Exchange, and Communication.¹
- Operationalizes the Standard’s Transparency Framework goal to “Promote awareness, understanding, and public confidence in Ontario’s public health system” by informing the public how the Board of Health is protecting and promoting individual and community health and responding to local community needs.
- Collaborates with subject matter experts and supports Agency program areas to develop impactful communications that are accessible, accurate and understandable. This ensures that communications meet Program Standards for improving public knowledge through developing and implementing local communications strategies or adapting national/provincial communications strategies where local assessment has identified a need.¹

Discussion

In 2023, Communications pivoted from a COVID 19-driven communications strategy to one that engages community members with a variety of public health topics. The following are highlights and results of WDG Public Health Communications outreach.

Pandemic Communications Survey

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, Communications played a significant role in providing information to the WDG community. To gain a comprehensive understanding of WDG Public Health’s communications response, a survey was developed and distributed to 50 communications partners (media members, partners, and communicators) in December 2023. The feedback was very positive, indicating that the significant investment and effort put into being effective communication partners led to positive outcomes. Some of the highlights and results are as follows:

- 96 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that communications from WDG Public Health were timely.
- 96 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that requests for information to WDG Public Health were returned in a timely fashion.

- 100 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that information from WDG Public Health was relevant and accurate.
- 92 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that information from WDGPH met their organization’s needs.
- 79 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that communications from WDG Public Health were consistent with agency values.
- 88 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agree with the statement “WDG Public Health was easy to work with.”
- 88 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “WDG Public Health was a collaborative partner.” Below are some qualitative statement examples:
 - “The open-door dialogue enhanced our collective ability to support our community.”
 - “The team is one of the best to work with. Quick to respond, clear communication, great at breaking down complex topics in a way the average person can understand.”
 - “I really appreciate that long-term relationships with reporters still matter at Public Health. I tried not to ask too often but Dr. Mercer made herself available for interviews. She is clear and concise and gave easy to understand information to our readers. I found her reassuring in a time of great uncertainty.”

Traditional News Media

In 2023, Communications ensured media partners had prompt access to information and key spokespersons. Dr. Mercer, Medical Officer of Health and CEO, along with Dr. Tenenbaum, Associate Medical Officer of Health, largely represented the Agency in the media. Additionally, Communications and other senior leaders occasionally acted as spokespersons as needed.

Highlights of 2023 news media efforts include:

- The Agency was mentioned in the media 478 times.
- Building on the sizable audience Dr. Mercer garnered as the key spokesperson throughout the pandemic, Dr. Mercer continues to be the key agency spokesperson (and in her absence, Dr. Tenenbaum) and continued to participate in weekly interviews with CTV Kitchener.
- Communications prepared and distributed 10 media releases (see Table 1).

Table 1: WDGPB Media Releases, 2023

Date	Media Release/Statements
March 7	Media Release: Pertussis cases identified in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph
April 3	Media Release: April is Oral Health Month
April 25	Media Release: Statement from Dr. Nicola Mercer on National Immunization Week
June 1	Media Release: Public Health wants to know what you think about cannabis
June 8	Media Release: Guelph's Air Quality Index forecast is now at "High Risk"
June 28	Media Release: Region's Air Quality Index forecast is now at "High Risk"
July 4	Media Release: Take precautions during this week's heat
August 31	Statement from Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum on International Overdose Awareness Day
October 5	Media Release: Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health launches fall 2023 COVID/Flu clinics
November 1	Media Release: November is Radon Action Month

Social Media

In 2023, the Agency's primary social media channels were:

- [Twitter: @WDGPublicHealth](#)
- [Facebook: @WDGPublicHealth](#)
- [Instagram: @WDGPublicHealth](#)
- [LinkedIn: Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health](#)

In 2023, factors such as posting less frequently (756 sent messages in 2023 vs. 1,225 in 2022) has led to a decline in impressions, engagements, and post link clicks year over year (see Table 2). However, WDG Public Health social media performance totals are similar to pre-covid, while posting less than half as often, indicating the success of using a content strategy that focuses

on quality posts that leverage social media algorithms to retain and build on the community following gained during COVID-19. In addition:

- WDG Public Health Instagram measured the highest engagement rate increase since the height of the pandemic in 2020, at 17 percent, and a 223 percent increase of people sharing content organically to their profiles.
- While overall engagements were down on Instagram, paid engagements were up 55 percent year over year, demonstrating Meta’s prioritization of paid over organic content.
- The top performing post across all platforms in 2023 with 8,228 impressions and 276 engagements was “Use layers of protection against respiratory viruses,” posted on [X \(Twitter\)](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) on December 30, 2023.

Communications will continue to adjust the Agency’s social media strategy with the changing social media landscape, including increasing paid social content, using a variety of post types (i.e., reels, stories, photos, videos, etc.), publishing at optimum times, sharing current Public Health messaging and information including tagging partners and using relevant hashtags, and sharing partner content to engage with and reach the WDG community.

Table 2: Social Media Channel Performance Summary, 2023 vs. 2022

Social Channel	Impressions*	Engagements**	Post Link Clicks***	Audience****
Facebook	1M ↓52%	23.5K ↓68%	5.5K ↓71%	12K ↑2%
Instagram	450K ↓28.5%	6K ↓16%	2.8K ↓72.5%	7.3K ↑1%
X (Twitter)	260K ↓74%	8K ↓77%	2K ↓75%	14.2K ↓3%
LinkedIn	13K ↓40%	1K ↓43%	1K ↓48%	2.3K ↑10%
Totals	1.7M ↓54%	38K ↓68%	8.5K ↓70%	36K ↑0.5%

*Impressions refers to the number of times that any content associated with the page was displayed to users during the reporting period. This includes both organic (non-paid) and paid activity.

**Engagements refers to the number of times that users reacted to, commented on, shared, or clicked on posts during the reporting period. This includes both organic (non-paid) and paid activity.

***Post Link Clicks is the number of times that users clicked on links from posts during the reporting period. For Instagram, the metric measures bio link clicks.

****Audience refers to the number of users who like/follow the page as of the last day of the reporting period.

Public Website

The website serves as a central hub for providing accurate and up-to-date information on public health topics. In 2023,

- Communications facilitated updating content across the website to reflect current information that had become outdated during the Agency’s COVID-19 response.
- Communications collaborated with Client and Community Support on content development to support the implementation of the new WDG Public Health Chatbot.
- Total views of the website were down compared to the previous year (750K vs. 2M), however, with a return to regular public health messaging, the website experienced 150 percent more views than pre-pandemic.
- COVID-19-related pages continued to be the majority of the top-visited pages for the fourth year in a row (see Table 3).
- Communications worked with the Health Promotion team to promote a Cannabis Survey, resulting in the page “[Weed and Young People](#)” experiencing an influx of visitors to round out the top five visited pages.

Table 3: Top Pages Visited by Pageviews, 2023

Page	Views
Outbreak Bulletin	39K
Fall COVID, Flu and RSV	37K
Status of Cases in WDG Dashboard	33K
Weed and Young People	15K
Drop-in COVID-19 vaccination clinics	10K

Blog

The Stay Well WDG Blog is a valuable communications tool that offers stories, testimonials, information, and experiences in a conversational and less formal tone to engage with readers on public health topics. In 2023, the blog had approximately 3600 subscribers and ten new blogs were published. Highlights include:

- The average open rate of the blog by subscribers was over 57.2 percent (industry average is 35 percent).
- The top viewed blog posted in 2023 was “[The Basics – Five simple ways every family can give their child a great start in life.](#)”

- Past years blogs continued to attract the highest number of blog views and inform thousands of visitors to the WDG Public Health website in 2023 (see Table 4).

Looking ahead to 2024, Communications is focused on increasing relevant and engaging blog content, engaging new and current subscribers, and revising and updating past top blog topics.

Table 4: Top Blog Posts Visited by Views, 2023

Blog Post	Views
How to say “no” to norovirus in your home	9.2K
What happens when you can’t afford dental care? <i>(Note: This blog was originally published in 2016 and updated in April 2024 to reflect current information.)</i>	6.5K
The simple facts everyone should know about hookah	3.8K
Is your well water safe or is it making you sick?	2.6K
15 outdoor activities to celebrate spring	2.3K

Staff Intranet Website

Communications and IT developed a new staff intranet website that successfully launched in March 2023. A staff survey was implemented to gather input on the previous intranet site’s content, functionality, and user experience. This feedback was used to develop an improved, user-friendly interface for finding and accessing WDG Public Health staff resources and information, and updated content and navigation.

A one-year follow-up feedback survey was conducted in March 2024. The transition to the new staff intranet site has resulted in a significant increase in user engagement, with 51 percent of respondents visiting the site at least once a week, up from 34 percent; and the respondents visiting at least once a month has nearly doubled (29% vs. 15% previously). The feedback on the overall user experience of the new staff intranet was very positive with 77 percent of respondents rating their overall user experience with the new staff intranet site as either very good (54%) or excellent (23%). Overall, staff are engaging more with the platform and are very satisfied with its usability, functionality, design, and content.

Library Services

The Librarian supports the third Foundational Standard, “Effective Public Health Practice”, specifically the first section, “Program Planning, Evaluation, and Evidence-Informed Decision Making” by assisting public health professionals to find, organize and use information to support evidence-based research, programs, and services.

The Librarian provides literature searches, information services and copyright support to the Medical Officer of Health and public health staff and management.

In 2023, the Librarian was involved in the following projects:

- Developed and implemented a library communications plan to inform new and existing staff of library services and copyright supports. The plan included the creation and distribution of a printed library services card to all staff and educational messages and resource-sharing through the staff e-newsletter and intranet.
- Research team member of 'Health Information Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic' study team in collaboration with other Ontario Public Health Units and university librarians.
- Member of the newly re-formed Research Ethics committee
- Elected 2024 President of the [Wellington Waterloo Dufferin Health Library Network \(WWDHLN\)](#).

Health Equity Implications

Communications ensures information is available to the public and diverse populations in accessible, meaningful, and relevant ways. This means tailoring messages for various audiences and sharing information across multiple channels, including traditional media, digital media and in person. For critical health messages or crisis communications, it is crucial that multiple opportunities to receive messages are available to everyone in the community.

Communications is committed to meeting the WDGPH audience's unique needs. In each interaction with WDGPH, every client can expect to be treated with respect, dignity, and courtesy.

Conclusion

Communications led, facilitated, and supported a variety of campaigns in 2023 that reintroduced programs and messages that had been usurped by COVID key messaging. The tools that engaged a wide community audience throughout the pandemic were employed to keep that audience informed and engaged about WDGPH's programs, services, and resources. The pandemic opened opportunities to engage with a wide audience through the media, on social media and via the website. As the Agency looks to the future through the lens of the 2024–2028 Strategic Plan, Communications will focus on retaining and growing message reach and providing key messages that support “Health and well-being for all.”

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- Population Health Assessment
- Health Equity
- Effective Public Health Practice
- Emergency Management

Program Standards

- Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- Food Safety
- Healthy Environments
- Healthy Growth and Development
- Immunization
- Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- Safe Water
- School Health
- Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- Improve health outcomes
- Focus on children's health
- Build strong partnerships
- Innovate our programs and services
- Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system

References

1. Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services, and Accountability. [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2024 April 4]. Available from: <https://tinyurl.com/ynz5pn6f>