



**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT  
TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY  
BY THE HONOURABLE KIM N. WILSON, JP, MP  
MINISTER OF HEALTH  
PREPAREDNESS AWARENESS OF THE CORONA VIRUS  
28<sup>th</sup> February 2020**

**Mr Speaker** and Honourable Members,

I rise today to offer a further update and an appeal regarding the steadily escalating public health threat of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. The spread of COVID-19 across the globe highlights that it is highly infectious and therefore it will remain a threat to Bermuda in the foreseeable future.

This is an unexpected and unusual threat to health, with impact on travel and trade. On January 30th the World Health Organization designated it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), and so a coordinated, international effort has been mounted to address COVID-19.

This public health risk must be mitigated. Such an historic threat can only be managed by an unusually high level of cooperation, collaboration and solidarity. And it is for this reason that I rise to call us to a higher level of collaboration than ever before.

In this unprecedented situation, Bermuda must rely on the cooperation of all sectors, all professional disciplines, all individuals to work together to face the threat of COVID-19.

I am pleased to inform this Honourable House that as of today, there have been no cases of COVID-19 identified in Bermuda.

There are no current suspect cases, even though over 67 travellers have required public health monitoring for the infection. At present no individuals receiving supervision by public health have shown signs of illness. This is the good news.

To counter balance this good news is the reality that the spread of the virus is on track to become a pandemic in the weeks ahead. A pandemic is a new infection that is serious and spreads to all countries. The last pandemic was the 2009 H1N1 influenza which ultimately reached every end of the globe, and now circulates as the seasonal influenza, still causing outbreaks of serious illness especially during the winter and spring.

Although COVID-19 is not currently in Bermuda, it has been documented in over 81,000 people in nearly 40 countries, including in our region.

As of today, the countries for which there is a travel advisory and public health follow up in Bermuda include: China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. This is expected to change imminently to include Italy and Iran.

The Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit (ESU) is actively monitoring the developments globally as this is a rapidly evolving situation. I can give assurance that for Bermuda the risk remains low for those who have not travelled to affected countries.

Nevertheless, given the degree of travel by Bermuda residents and the global travel patterns, it is likely just a matter of time before we are face to face with this new public health threat.

It is for this reason, that I rise to appeal to the members of this Honourable House, and to all of Bermuda to unite and work together to meet the challenge we are likely to face from COVID-19.

We are in a phase of preparedness for a potential pandemic. We must focus on preparing for this situation. According to the WHO, we must prepare to detect cases, prepare to treat cases, prepare to follow contacts, and prepare to put in place adequate containment measures to control the spread.

You may be familiar with the public health phrase, "Health in All Policies". If this was an abstract, unclear concept before, the threat of COVID-19 illustrates the need for "Health in All Policies". All sectors of government, all businesses, all schools, all workplaces, neighbourhood clubs, faith groups and each and every individual has a role. You can either help the community or you can hurt our chances of preventing a severe impact from COVID-19. It depends on what we do, or do not do. We each have a role to play.

The role of the Ministry of Health is to convene and guide a multi-sectoral effort to assure we can prevent the entry of the novel coronavirus causing COVID-19, detect it early if it does enter, and manage individuals appropriately to prevent further spread within the community.

The Public Health Response Team (PHERT) is this multi-disciplinary group comprised with individuals from 15 sectors, and growing. PHERT members meet at least twice weekly to update on preparedness efforts, discuss various risk scenario, identify vulnerabilities in the community and address them. The collaborative work has been intense.

**Mr Speaker,** We are well aware of the many concerns of the public, and within the PHERT working groups we are endeavouring daily to address these concerns. One concern

receiving ongoing attention is the reliable questioning of all travellers as they arrive in Bermuda at our Ports of Entry, seaports and airport.

The airport, with over 800 arrivals daily is an area where heightened training is being focused at this time. All Customs Officers will be asking all arriving passengers an important question to assess their risk of having had exposure to the novel coronavirus. The question being asked is “Where have you travelled in the past 21 days”. All passengers, Bermuda residents and visitors, must be asked this question. Depending on the answer, travellers may be referred to a public health officer for further risk assessment and advice.

Depending on the countries visited and the activities in those countries, they may be required to quarantine themselves in their homes for up to 14 days, and monitor themselves for signs of illness such as fever, cough or shortness of breath.

Individuals with these symptoms, and who have a travel risk history, should always call ahead to their physicians or to the hospital Emergency Department for advice. It will be important for them to identify themselves as having travelled to an area where cases of COVID-19 were present. Telephone advice will be given to individuals, including how to safely travel to a healthcare setting if that is required.

The Ministry of Health is collaborating with the hospital Emergency Department and community physicians so that individuals at risk of having COVID-19 or who have only mild symptoms can be investigated and receive care within their homes, thereby not overburdening the healthcare system. As always, it is essential to reserve the hospital Emergency Department for those requiring hospital management. Fortunately, most individuals with COVID-19 appear not to require hospital care and ultimately recover fully.

**Mr Speaker,** The challenges presented by individuals having to be quarantined can be quite complex, and require cooperation of individuals, their workplaces and schools.

Individuals under self-quarantine will have to miss work or school and should avoid all public spaces. They must avoid public transportation and places where people gather such as faith gatherings, sports events, and concerts, for example. Pandemic preparedness policies are required by schools, workplaces, and employers to enable people to stay home when sick or when being quarantined, without penalty.

The Ministry of Health will shortly be sharing further advice from international public health authorities to assist workplaces, schools, and other organizations to prevent and control infections in these environments. This information will be available on our website.

As a tourism-dependent economy, Bermuda must assure potential visitors that we are a safe and healthy destination. Hotels and all guest accommodations, regardless of size, must have robust sanitation programmes, and infection prevention and control policies in place to reduce the risk of infections of all types. They must be able to identify early any guest who may be ill with a serious infectious disease so that prompt advice from medical and public health professionals can be sought. The tourism sector is collaborating closely with health to maintain a healthy tourism product.

My point, **Mr Speaker** is that in ordinary times and especially in these extraordinary times, there must be collaboration and cross-fertilization of health policy with all others: business, education, tourism, transport, Customs, Immigration, Police, Fire, Marine & Ports, Civil Aviation and so forth. Each of these sectors has interfaced with health to keep Bermuda safe and healthy.

We must continue to do so, and in an even more vigorous way, as we face the threat of COVID-19. I am appealing for solidarity. COVID-19 prevention and control will require nothing short of community-wide and bipartisan collaboration and cooperation to keep Bermuda safe.

Thank you, **Mr Speaker**

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