



## A 2021 review of enablers supporting COVID-19 vaccine administration in community pharmacy

2021 has been a tumultuous year, where community pharmacy rose to the challenge of being a key player in the largest public health immunization campaign in history.

In December 2020, the Neighbourhood Pharmacy Association of Canada (Neighbourhood Pharmacies) collaborated with the Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA) on a [COVID-19 Vaccine and Pharmacy Readiness Report](#) (“*Vaccine Readiness*”) outlining the case for the community pharmacy channel to be a key component of COVID-19 vaccine administration across the country, alongside other healthcare providers. This report highlighted factors such as community pharmacy’s accessibility and convenience for Canadians, the sector’s proven experience administering vaccines, and its supportive digital infrastructure. The trusted, longitudinal relationships pharmacy teams have with patients to combat vaccine hesitancy and increase uptake were other noted key elements.

Governments agreed! Community pharmacy was clearly a necessary channel for effective, equitable and efficient vaccine deployment. Community pharmacies began administering COVID-19 vaccines to eligible Canadians in Alberta in February 2021. **Since then, community pharmacies across the country have administered more than 12 million COVID-19 vaccine doses** – including first, second, third/booster doses as well as pediatric doses.



### Community Pharmacies Surpass 12 Million COVID-19 Doses!

For an inspiring and in-depth look at community pharmacy’s achievements in COVID-19 vaccination this year, please read “Scaling Heights”, the cover story of our [Fall/Winter 2021 Issue of Neighbourhood Pharmacy Gazette](#).



## What Enabled Community Pharmacy’s Success? Revisiting our 2020 recommendations:

The *Vaccine Readiness* report put forward seven recommendations to governments to maximize community pharmacy’s role in helping Canada achieve its goal of vaccinating all Canadians by the end of 2021. Throughout 2021, Neighbourhood Pharmacies continued to advance these recommendations through advocacy, engagement, and communication activities, and to support community pharmacy operators in their vaccination efforts.

One year later, we look back on how well those recommendations were implemented across the country. What worked, what we’ve learned, and how community pharmacy, governments, providers and the health system can build on progress to strengthen public healthcare capacity and support Canada’s pandemic recovery. (*Original recommendations have been reordered and regrouped for clarity.*)



## Our Recommendations:

- *Provide clear communications from all levels of government on timing and execution of administration plans.*
- *Provide clear, consistent, and frequent public service announcements to all health providers regarding patient prioritization and instructions for receiving a COVID-19 vaccine.*

The federal and provincial/territorial (P/T) governments had the monumental challenge of not only planning the largest public immunization campaign in history, but also ensuring that plans were communicated clearly. While governments brought together important stakeholders in vaccine rollout discussions, national and provincial pharmacy associations took the lead working with their provincial and public health departments to ensure that there was consistent two-way communication about pharmacy requirements for efficient administration.

Pharmacy associations were essential in ensuring that all manner of operational considerations – from regulatory or policy changes, to human resource issues, to technology and information systems – were included in planning. Equally important, pharmacy leaders across the sector served as reliable and credible conduits to distill and transmit information to the frontline teams delivering immunizations. Everyone consistently reiterated how vital these frequent and transparent communication touchpoints with governments and other key stakeholders were to successful rollout. Together, Neighbourhood Pharmacies and other sector leaders invested significant time and care in this dialogue which helped foster and strengthen government relationships with pharmacy. The value these new trusted relationships will bring to continued discussions on increasing the pharmacy channel's role in other public health efforts cannot be underestimated.

However, there were some communications lessons learned:

- Misinformation can be more viral than the virus itself. Governments, health system partners and healthcare workers were unprepared for the time and energy needed to combat efforts to discredit public health communications.
- Guidance and policies could change on a daily basis as medical officers of health responded to new challenges. This speed of change was difficult to accommodate, even with effective and timely communications.
- Policy changes impacting vaccine delivery in community pharmacy were often announced by the media, before reaching pharmacy operators themselves through official channels.

### **The Bottom Line:**

While all levels of government were committed to clear communication with stakeholders, unanticipated communications challenges still occurred. However, communication efforts were bolstered by constant dialogue and new relationships between stakeholders, and there was broad recognition of community pharmacy's fundamental role in public health efforts. Going forward, **Neighbourhood Pharmacies will continue to foster this recognition and these new relationships, cementing our unique position as the voice of pharmacy business in Canada, connecting pharmacy operators, supply chain managers, and manufacturers with governments and other stakeholders for common goals.**



## Our Recommendations:

- ***Ensure transparent and committed allocation of inventory to the community pharmacy sector.***
- ***Distribute COVID-19 vaccines through the current pharmaceutical distribution system.***
- ***Provide the necessary supplies needed for pharmacists to immunize Canadians.***

Distribution, allocation, and supply were all key “watchwords” of COVID-19 vaccination efforts. Neighbourhood Pharmacies’ original recommendations reflected community pharmacy’s ten years of distribution experience with influenza vaccines and supplies. Leveraging this past experience, our goal was to mitigate potential allocation challenges, create distribution efficiencies and minimize supply shortages with COVID-19 vaccines.

While fair and transparent vaccine allocation was a key principle established by the Federal Government, limited or delayed shipments to Canada, or rapid changes to redistribute vaccines to regions most in need sometimes meant that allocations to pharmacies were unclear and poorly understood. Jurisdictions with centralized allocation have suggested it provided a more consistent line of sight into what the entire channel would receive, which worked particularly well when that allocation could be distributed by established pharmacy wholesalers. Neighbourhood Pharmacies advocated strongly for pull distribution models, and, while several jurisdictions switched from push to pull models as supply became more abundant, pharmacies had to be nimble to respond to these changes.



### The Bottom Line:

While there was a clear commitment to transparent allocation at all levels, it was not always achieved. There is more work to be done to ensure that community pharmacy’s voice is clearly heard at all federal, P/T and regional policy discussions relating to public health and pharmaceutical distribution. Only a few jurisdictions opted to use existing pharmaceutical wholesalers to get vaccines to pharmacies. While there is no single model that works for all, **Neighbourhood Pharmacies’ position continues to be that wholesale distribution of vaccines to the community pharmacy channel will increase efficiency, reduce wastage, and optimize the channel’s role in vaccination efforts. In 2022, our key advocacy priority will be expanding access to all routine publicly funded vaccines through community pharmacies, with wholesale distribution being a primary enabler.**

## Our Recommendation:

- ***Vaccinate pharmacists as essential front-line healthcare workers.***

Pharmacies in all jurisdictions were designated as essential healthcare services early on in the pandemic, meaning they remained open and accessible to Canadians. But as healthcare workers in hospitals and other facilities became eligible for priority COVID-19 vaccination, pharmacy teams in several provinces began providing first-dose COVID-19 vaccines without themselves being vaccinated.

Neighbourhood Pharmacies advocated directly for pharmacy teams to be recognized as priority healthcare workers, at a pan-Canadian level. Jurisdictions were initially slow to respond, but by the time second doses began rolling out, pharmacy teams across the country had been prioritized for COVID-19 vaccination through various mechanisms. As the country begins considering its booster/third dose plans, pharmacy teams will continue to be prioritized for vaccination.



### **The Bottom Line:**

It took more effort than expected, but pharmacy teams were all prioritized for COVID-19 vaccination, reminding governments and the public of the essential role community pharmacies play in making healthcare accessible to Canadians. **This recognition also illuminates the larger need to protect the health, wellbeing and overall resiliency of pharmacy teams; something that Neighbourhood Pharmacies will be addressing in 2022.**

## **Our Recommendation:**

- ***Ensure a vaccine administration fee that reflects the added time and complexity of administration and education related to this novel vaccine.***

As pharmacies became authorized to provide COVID-19 vaccines, provincial governments established remuneration fees ranging from \$13 to \$25 for vaccine administration services. While nearly all provinces provided fees that were higher than existing fees for influenza immunizations, the differential generally intended to cover PPE, one-time infrastructure costs or sanitary measures. Only a few provinces put in place fee structures that considered the added time and tasks required to provide COVID-19 vaccines, such as addressing vaccine hesitancy, navigating vaccination booking systems, or answering questions even if patients ultimately sought their vaccine elsewhere. However, Alberta and B.C. provided increased fees on weekends and holidays, recognizing the added pressures pharmacies faced during these times, including the need for additional staff.

### **The Bottom Line:**

The COVID-19 immunization fees put in place to date are a good step forward and clear signal that governments appreciate the value and complexity of immunization services. **Neighbourhood Pharmacies' key focus in 2022 will be expanding access to all routine publicly funded vaccines through community pharmacies, including working with our members, partners, and governments to ensure that pharmacy teams are fairly remunerated for the full spectrum of activities involved in these immunization services.**

## **Conclusion**

In 2021, Neighbourhood Pharmacies successfully advocated for the administration of COVID-19 vaccines in pharmacies nationwide, helping bring the vaccine to over 12 million Canadians. This clearly demonstrates the extent to which community pharmacy can be an integral health and public health partner when fully enabled, and is a stellar example of how our hard work over the past decade has moved us forward to a new level of involvement and recognition in healthcare. We look forward to continued progress in 2022!

