

Workplace COVID illness claims back on rise

ANDREW A. DUFFY
Times Colonist

The number of COVID-related claims filed with WorkSafeBC appears to be rising again, but may not reach last year's levels due to high vaccination rates in the province, says the workplace safety organization.

Tanya Houghton, WorkSafe's director of special care services, said illness claims received by the organization have consistently mirrored waves of the pandemic — as COVID cases started to rise again at the end of the summer, so did illness claims.

"As cases start to spike, it usually takes a few weeks to hit the [workplace] compensation system," she said, adding: "The spike between July and August this year is substantially different than what we saw last winter, and with vaccination rates being what they are, that isn't surprising."

From a low of 87 COVID claims registered in July this year, it jumped to 246 in August, 278 in September and 266 in October.

At the same time last year, the low point was August, when 76 claims were filed, but that spiked to 390 in September before hitting the highest point of 943 claims filed in December.

Houghton wouldn't say if she thinks the province could see another winter spike like last year, noting employers in general have been keen to work with prevention services and implement safety and social-distancing guidelines.

But she said with mask mandates and strong vaccination numbers, this year should be better than last.

The province's most recent pandemic update showed 90.1 per cent of eligible people 12 and older in B.C. have received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine

and 85.5 per cent have received two doses.

Houghton noted that illness claims being filed with WorkSafe have shifted from predominantly health-care workers to other fields, as employers have started recalling workers, and offices and businesses have begun reopening.

Last summer, 75 per cent of claims were filed by health-care workers, while they now represent less than 50 per cent.

Houghton said claims in other sectors, including education, are expected to rise.

According to WorkSafe figures, of the 6,789 claims filed since the start of the pandemic, 3,119 have been in health care, 494 in education, 448 in business services, 343 in retail trade and 327 in agriculture.

When broken down into smaller classification units, long-term care saw the most illness claims filed with 1,141, fol-

lowed by acute care at 1,140 and then the public school system at 466.

Teri Mooring, president of the B.C. Teachers' Federation, said a high vaccination rate — about 95 per cent — among teachers has likely limited the number of claims filed so far.

She noted the bulk of teacher claims, about 75 per cent, come from elementary school teachers.

"That's not surprising, given younger children were not vaccinated, and it's also much harder to maintain physical distancing in elementary schools with younger children," she said.

Mooring said it's disappointing that the number is as high as it is, especially as the union has asked for more preventative measures in schools.

She said the fact that the province waited to see case counts before measures

like mask mandates were implemented, rather than being proactive with steps such as testing in schools and ensuring each classroom has proper ventilation, is a sore point.

The union has also been critical of the amount and consistency of information provided on cases, possible exposures and outbreaks in schools, which Mooring argues can lead to larger-scale outbreaks.

She said when information isn't conveyed to families and educators, they can't make informed decisions — like postponing trips or birthday parties — that can limit the spread of COVID.

"For the most part, [safety measures] eventually get put in place, but it's after a lot of advocacy and after people get sick," she said.

"That's been hard to understand."

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Transit official honoured for finding missing child on his first day on the job

PEDRO ARRAIS
Times Colonist

West Shore RCMP has presented a B.C. Transit supervisor with a certificate of appreciation for finding a missing child on his first day on the job.

On May 1, West Shore RCMP received a call from a View Royal family saying their 10-year old daughter had uncharacteristically left home without her phone or tablet. The girl has health challenges and her parents were concerned about her.

Jeff Birtwistle, a transit supervisor, heard over the radio that a transit operator had seen someone matching the description of the child and went



B.C. Transit supervisor Jeff Birtwistle, left, accepts an Officer in Charge certificate of appreciation from West Shore RCMP Superintendent Todd Preston for helping to find a missing 10-year-old girl in May. B.C. TRANSIT

to see if he could help.

A short time later, he caught up with the girl across from West Shore Recreation Centre and stayed with her until police arrived. It wasn't long before the child — found 45 minutes after the initial call to police — was reunited with her family.

"The success of any investiga-

tion often relies on the cooperation between partnering organizations and local agencies," said Todd Preston, West Shore RCMP superintendent. "The actions of Jeffrey Birtwistle and B.C. Transit are prime examples of how a successful collaboration yields a positive outcome."

On Nov. 1, an Officer in Charge certificate of appreciation was presented to Birtwistle by Preston at B.C. Transit's Langford Transit Centre. The certificate commended Birtwistle for taking it upon himself to go to the area and help find the girl.

"It's definitely rewarding being recognized on behalf of everyone else at B.C. Transit that was involved," said Birtwistle. "I believe everyone at B.C. Transit in Victoria works hard and does a good job in supporting our community and it's definitely nice to be recognized."

According to B.C. Transit, requests of this nature are common and there have been a number of instances where people in the organization have played a key role in locating missing persons.

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Wildfire season wasn't the worst

The Canadian Press

VANCOUVER — British Columbia's 2021 wildfire season saw the destruction of the village of Lytton and homes levelled in several other Interior regions, but the B.C. Wildfire Service says it was not the worst season on record.

A 2021 wildfire summary says about \$565 million was spent in the "tremendously challenging" period between April 1 and Sept. 30, when 1,610 wildfires charred 8,682 square kilometres. A provincial state of emergency was declared on July 21 and wasn't lifted until Sept. 14.

Total firefighting costs for the year could grow because the season doesn't officially end until next March, but the report says the figure won't surpass the \$649 million spent in 2017, B.C.'s worst fire season, when 12,000 square kilometres of land burned.

Rezoning bid for former Times Colonist building heads to public hearing

ROXANNE EGAN-ELLIOTT
Times Colonist

A proposal to revamp the former Times Colonist building on Douglas Street with a brewery, distillery, brewpub, liquor retail sales and commissary kitchen will go to a public hearing.

Merchant House Capital is planning to create a "campus-style" mix of offices, liquor manufacturing space and a 13-storey residential tower. They are applying to rezone the land to allow for the new uses. An application for the 150-unit tower, to be built on the parking lot, is still being prepared for city council.

Major structural and seismic work is complete in the existing building, at 2621 Douglas St., and construction is expected to be finished in June 2022.

David Fullbrook, chief executive of Merchant House Capital, said there's been a lot of interest from potential tenants to operate a brewery, brewpub and distillery in the renovated space, and he expects many will be prepared to move forward if the rezoning

application is successful.

A 20,000-square-foot area will offer commercial kitchen space for food truck operators, caterers, delivery food services and other food service businesses to prepare food and beverages for sale on and off-site. The concept allows smaller start-up businesses to expand their operations and share kitchen costs to reduce overall costs and risks, Fullbrook said.

Merchant House Capital is envisioning a redeveloped space where people can "work, live and play all in one location," Fullbrook said.

"Hopefully it'll help turn the corner for, you know, an underutilized part of the city, at a time when we we kind of need to be efficient on how we use real estate," Fullbrook said.

The Times Colonist moved out of the building last September, relocating editorial, advertising and business staff to Upper Harbour Place in Vic West and circulation staff to Esquimalt.

A date has not yet been set for the public hearing.

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Anyone who spoke to man missing in Fairy Creek area asked to contact Sooke RCMP

Times Colonist

Sooke RCMP are continuing to look for a 61-year-old man who is believed to have been last seen hiking between two camps in the Fairy Creek watershed area on Oct. 13.

Gerald Kearney was reported missing on Oct. 21.

Members of the RCMP emergency response team, directed by the Juan de Fuca search and rescue search manager, carried out an extensive search on Monday in the Granite Mainline area, between the two camps. Banks on each side of the trail were searched, and a drone and police dog were used.

Searchers faced rough weather and difficult terrain, police said. No other search areas have been identified, and there are no plans to search that site again, they said.

Sooke RCMP are responsible for the investigation into Kearney's disappearance, and are staying in touch with the Victoria Police Department, because Kearney was known to live alone on a boat in Victoria.

A backpack belonging to Kearney, nicknamed Smiley, was found in the area earlier.

Investigators want to speak with anyone who saw or spoke to Kearney on Oct. 13.

He is described as Caucasian, 5 feet, 4 inches tall and 210 lbs, with shoulder-length grey hair.



Gerald Kearney was reported missing on Oct. 21, but was last seen on Oct. 13 hiking between two camps in the Fairy Creek area. Anyone with information is asked to call the Sooke RCMP at 250-642-5241. VIA SOOKE RCMP

THE DISTRICT OF SAANICH

2022 MUNICIPAL APPOINTMENT TO THE ADVISORY DESIGN PANEL

APPLICATIONS BEING ACCEPTED

The District of Saanich is accepting applications from Landscape Architects wishing to be a member of the Advisory Design Panel for a **2 year term**, ending December 31, 2023.

The purpose of the technical Advisory Design Panel is to advise Council or the Director of Planning on the design merits of plans supporting specific public and private development applications. Applicants must be available to attend the meetings which occur twice per month on the second and fourth Wednesdays at 3:00 p.m.

FOR INFORMATION: Contact the Legislative Division at 250-475-5501 for information on the Advisory Design Panel.

HOW TO APPLY: Contact the BC Society of Landscape Architects (BCSLA) at admin@bcsla.org

APPLICATION DEADLINE: 4:30 P.M., WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2021. Submit to the BC Society of Landscape Architects (BCSLA) at admin@bcsla.org

Legislative Services Division

District of Saanich

2nd Floor – 770 Vernon Avenue

E: council@saanich.ca

T: 250-475-5501

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THE DISTRICT OF SAANICH

2022 SCHEDULE OF COUNCIL MEETINGS

Pursuant to the *Community Charter*, the public is advised that the 2022 schedule for Regular Council Meetings is available on our web site at saanich.ca; by contacting the Legislative Services Division at 250-475-5501; or, by e-mailing council@saanich.ca. All meetings are held in the Council Chambers, Saanich Municipal Hall, 770 Vernon Avenue.

Please note that this schedule may be changed by resolution of Council.

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