



April 21, 2020 - Statement from the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Saskatchewan on Transparency in a Pandemic

As we all know, we are in the middle of a pandemic and many are working hard to protect Saskatchewan. Many are working long hours and assuming risks. All of us need a certain amount of information about the spread of COVID-19 in our province.

I have written earlier about a [pandemic and privacy](#) and there is a balancing act between public interest and privacy. There is a big gap between giving little to no information and giving all information. In the middle is an opportunity for decision-makers to determine how much information to provide to the public. Officials are always free to provide aggregate or statistical data or de-identified personal information or personal health information. They can provide information such as how many are sick or pass away in a city, town, municipality, area or region. I would encourage as much transparency as is possible while respecting privacy to the extent possible. More is better under the circumstances we are now in.

Of course, giving someone's name and address as being affected would be going too far as this is their personal health information. Yes and maybe in small communities indicating one person is affected would identify a person. In those instances, there are work-a-rounds such as saying, "one person in the Ituna vicinity" or "one person north of White City". The idea is that officials can be transparent and provide as much information as is possible, but still avoid identifying an individual.

As the number of cases rise in our province, officials will have more latitude in providing statistical information to citizens as they won't be dealing with one person, but dealing with two, three or more persons in a community or area.

Individuals who are infected with COVID-19 may choose to divulge their personal health information in a public forum such as Facebook, Twitter or the media. They may choose to conduct interviews regarding their illness and recovery. That is their choice and we need to respect that they have voluntarily chosen to do so. If an individual does so, that does not give permission to the public body to release their name. A public body could, however, ask the individual to sign a consent agreeing to the release of name and details.

The Federal Information Commissioner, Caroline Maynard, in a [News Release](#) dated April 2, 2020 stated:

As Information Commissioner, I call upon heads of federal institutions to set the example in this regard, by providing clear direction and updating guidance on how information is to be managed in this new operating environment. Furthermore, I am of the firm view that institutions ought to display leadership by proactively disclosing information that is of fundamental interest to Canadians, particularly during this time of crisis when Canadians are looking for trust and reassurance from their government without undue delays.

The right of access is a means by which we not only hold our government to account, but determine how and why decisions were made and actions taken, in order to learn and find ways to do better in the future. It is only by being fully transparent, and respecting good information management practices and the right of access, that the government can build an open and complete public record of decisions and actions taken during this extraordinary period in our history—one that will inform future public policy decisions.

In conclusion, I ask public officials, elected and appointed, to continue to provide as much information as possible regarding our province and the Pandemic.

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Information and Privacy Commissioner

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