

Adoption rates will ‘make or break’ COVID Alert app: experts

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COVID-19



Ontario will soon be launching the COVID Alert exposure notification app and experts say the key to its efficacy is to get buy-in from as many people as possible.

“The key priority that we see here in order for this app to succeed is user trust,” explained Jacob Korenblum, senior manager of policy at Ontario Digital Service, adding the app is completely voluntary and has been designed with a privacy-first approach. “Scale really drives the power, so the more people use it, the more effective it is. You need to be interacting with somebody else who’s got the app in order to detect that they are near you and that you have been exposed.”

The Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON) hosted a [webinar on the new app July 7 entitled COVID-19: Tracing and Construction](#). Ontario is partnering with the federal government to launch the made-in-Ontario app nationally.

“Some of us are starting to think about the second wave. That’s why we got this webinar going, to try and understand more about this app and how we can use it to manage onsite activity and keep workers safe on a going forward basis,” said Andrew Pariser, vice-president of RESCON. “Right now, the largest risk is complacency.”

It will be important for the government and employers to communicate the nature of the app to the public, Michael Sherrard of Sherrard Kuzz LLP, told participants on the webinar.

“This app is not designed to collect personal health information, but I think we’re going to have to convince people of that,” he said. “There is going to be part of our population that is going to worry that by putting this app into their device.

“Adoption rates are going to make or break this.”

Korenblum said exposure notification is different from contact tracing, which is the process of public health calling those who tested positive for COVID-19 on the phone and asking them who they have been in contact with.

“We wanted to have a way to complement and support what was going on through the phone call process by extending that notification process to the folks you don’t know,” he said. “You can anonymously, discreetly and quickly tell other people using the app if they’ve been exposed so they can take action sooner. They can self-isolate, they can go get tested, they can follow the prevailing public health guidance.”

The Ontario government decided to develop an app in house, building on free open source code that was made available from volunteers from ecommerce company Shopify. It uses a new platform that was launched by Apple and Google which, for the first time, lets Android and IOS phones interact with each other to exchange information.

All users need to do is download the app from the app store to their device, Korenblum said. It automatically destroys all data related to the app every 21 days.

“The reason why we chose this solution...it’s really the most privacy protective option,” said Korenblum. “It does one thing and one thing only, which is notify you if you’ve been exposed. It doesn’t ask you where you’ve been, it doesn’t ask you who you have been near, it’s not collecting that data.

We like it because it can be customized to contain and offer the Ontario guidance that we all need because Ontario is not B.C., it’s not P.E.I.”

The app uses Bluetooth technology, not GPS, which tracks location.

“We’re very sensitive to what we’re seeing going on in other parts of the world,” Korenblum explained. “We’ve watched very closely what the general public and what different sectors such as constructors have said in those markets. Really the message has been clear, which is we want to be able to help and be helped, we don’t want the government tracking where we are going.”

It is also not intended to be a mandatory tool.

“It’s not designed to be a gating factor to access jobsites,” Korenblum said. “While we as the province are actively encouraging the voluntary use of the app, we’re being pretty clear to say that as an employer you are not able to compel folks to use this app. We want to protect privacy and give users choice.”

The app does not collect names, addresses, contacts or health information, Korenblum added.

“Anytime you are near another user of the app, you and they will exchange what we call a digital handshake, a randomly generated string of numbers,” he explained. “Those get stored temporarily on your phone but that’s all it is. Every time you encounter someone you are trading these numbers back and forth – random, anonymized, encrypted.”

If someone is using the app tests positive for COVID-19 and wants to let people know, they will be given a code to enter into the app with their test results from the lab.

“We’re encouraging you to tell people, but if you decide for whatever reason you don’t feel comfortable you still don’t have to,” he said. “Anyone that has been near you in the past two-week period will get a notification through their app.”

The app uses three elements to determine exposure: how long you have been near someone, the number of days since you have been around them and the distance.

“Anytime you’ve been within two metres of somebody for a period of 15 minutes or more that’s where we’re launching the app in Ontario based on public health guidance,” said Korenblum.

He added there may be different apps coming out on the market and the worksite. The idea is to create an ecosystem for these solutions to support and complement, not replace each other.

Sherrard said employers will also need to take a look internally at their policies with respect to, for example, having phones onsite.

“We have to think a little bit about what are the kinds of things we need to look at potentially amending...to maximize the possibility that this app will work,” he said.