



**ONTARIO  
AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE**

SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN  
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

January 11, 2024

**RE: Focus Group Invitation and Consent**

*Identifying Supports and Structures to Help Small and Rural Communities in Northern Ontario Respond to Disruption*

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**Background:**

My name is Leith Deacon and I am an Associate Professor at the University of Guelph. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a focus group that is part of a study exploring the experience of small and rural Northern Ontario communities' COVID-19 response. Financial support for this project is provided by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR).

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### **Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to identify supports and structures that would help small/rural communities in Northern Ontario to respond to disruption more effectively. The research has four objectives:

1. To identify municipal decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To explore successes and challenges experienced by small and rural communities in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To identify supports and structures that will help small and rural communities more effectively respond to disruption.
4. To compile and share findings from research to inform policy and practice.

### **Research Procedures:**

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are an elected representative or staff of a participating municipality, or staff of a public health unit or social service organization associated with a participating municipality who was in your role during the COVID-19 pandemic, including from January 2020 - June 2022. **You are now being asked to participate in a follow-up, in-person, focus group. Discussion will focus on your professional and organizational experiences with COVID-19.**

Participation will consist of attending one focus group with approximately 20 people. The session is expected to last 3.5 hours. A light snack and refreshments will be provided. The focus group will be held in a meeting room at the Holiday Inn in Sudbury, Ontario, on May 6 2024 from 8:30am-12pm. The session will be formatted as a workshop with small and large group discussions based on the findings of previous phases of this research project. The objective of the focus group is to collaboratively identify supports and structures that will help small and rural communities more effectively respond to disruption. The session will be audio recorded to ensure an accurate transcript of the focus group. Given the group format of this session, I will ask you to keep in confidence information that identifies, or could potentially identify, a participant and/or their comments.

### **Risks and Benefits:**

There are very few foreseen risks to participation in this study.

*Psychological risks:* All participants will be taking part within their professional role, and risk within this study is less than anything that would be encountered within other aspects of their work. There may be some degree of worry related to recalling the stress associated with working during the COVID pandemic.

Participation in a focus group increases the chance of indirect identification, however risks associated with this remain low due to the nature of the work. Published findings will not identify participating municipalities or individuals without explicit written or oral consent.

There are no direct personal benefits to your participation in this study. This research will contribute to informing policy and practice related to governance in small and rural communities. It is expected to benefit participating communities as well as rural communities elsewhere in Ontario and Canada. You do not waive any legal rights by agreeing to take part in this study.

One researcher is employed by the Timiskaming Health Unit; refusing to participate in this research will not impact any relationship you may have with Timiskaming Health Unit.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:**

Participation in this focus group is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw at any time with no effect on your future by contacting the researcher or stating in the moment. Due to the nature of focus groups, participant contributions after May 1 will not be able to be withdrawn; data will not be destroyed and will be kept. If you participate in the focus group, then your participation and that of your municipality will become known to all focus group participants; we ask that participants keep all contents of discussions confidential and within the focus group, but the research team cannot ensure this information will remain confidential. It should be noted that all collected data will be stored on recording devices, hard drives, and portable jump drives which will be encrypted using advanced file security software (Bitlocker: [www.uoguelph.ca/ccs/encryption](http://www.uoguelph.ca/ccs/encryption)).

Identifiable data will be kept until submission of results for publication (typically 3 – 6 months after conclusion of project). Non-identifiable data will be kept for a maximum of 5 years in a secure location at which time, all recorded information will be destroyed and disposed of. During this time, all members of the research team will have access to the data.

You will not be paid to participate in this study; however, if not already planning to attend the conference at which the focus group takes place, focus group participants will be refunded for their costs related to travel, food and accommodations. Those already attending will not be reimbursed for their costs.

If you have any questions about this study or your participation in this study, please contact:

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**Ethics:**

This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants. If you have questions regarding your rights and welfare as a research participant in this study (REB #22-10-010), please contact: Manager, Research Ethics, University of Guelph; [reb@uoguelph.ca](mailto:reb@uoguelph.ca); (519)-824-4120 Ext. 56606

**Consent statement: Consent may be provided in writing or verbally.**

I have read the letter of information and have had the nature of the study explained to me and agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Associated Municipality/Organization

OR

Verbal consent has been obtained

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Initials

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date