



Jonathan Wilkinson

NORTH VANCOUVER'S MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

A window onto harrowing times

Most of us have never experienced anything even remotely like COVID-19. The flood of phone calls and e-mails into my constituency office over the past eight weeks has provided a stark window onto the anxiety and stress gripping many in North Vancouver in these wrenching times.

You could hear it the other morning on the phone, in the voice of an immune-suppressed senior who was desperate to find non-surgical facemasks but unable to go outside. Our Constituency Director hung up the phone and spent much of the morning, as she put it, “taking a crash course in non-medical facemask procurement.”

Many of the people who call are surprised (and relieved) that the office is still open. It’s a virtual office these days, with most of our small staff working from home - putting in long hours, seven days a week since this began.

Our email volume is roughly ten times what it was prior to COVID-19.

Stranded abroad

The first real rush occurred after the Prime Minister advised Canadians abroad that “it’s time to come home.” Over the next few weeks, we heard from dozens of North Vancouverites stranded and strapped to find ways to get home as ports closed and airlines shut down.

North Vancouver resident Sanford Osler and his wife were among them. They were part of a group of 97 Canadians aboard the Coral Princess cruise ship unable to disembark for three weeks as it travelled the Atlantic and Pacific coasts searching for a port that would allow them to dock.

Said Sanford, “The constituency office played a vital role acting as a liaison with Global Affairs Canada, providing real-time updates and facilitating our eventual safe return. Your staff members were responsive and empathetic – with one even providing her personal cell phone number along with an invitation to call anytime.”

Virtual team meetings

Constituency staff conduct a “co-ordination” videoconference

each morning following the Prime Minister’s daily briefings to Canadians – knowing that, very soon, constituents will be contacting them looking for more detail on support programs, assistance in navigating application processes or just needing to talk to obtain reassurance.

It’s been a priority to have constituency staff available to provide answers and guidance on the programs created to support people who have lost their jobs, and small businesses struggling to stay afloat.

These programs were developed and implemented quickly because of the urgent need for a rapid response. Some of the calls from constituents have been a real help in identifying areas where programs were not initially working entirely as intended at the outset. This feedback has enabled me, as your Member of Parliament, to provide real-time input directly to Cabinet ministers overseeing these programs. It has been an exercise of ongoing improvement and refinement.

I am appreciative that so many constituents have been very understanding of the pressures that have been placed on my staff. What makes them so good at what they do is their empathy. But it can take a personal toll - for example, working with a highly-stressed small business owner who is looking for help to pay rent or face closing the doors. Then, moving on to the next case...and the next.

Seeing the goodness

These times have been very difficult for all of us. Yet, through the metaphoric window of my constituency office, I also see much that is hopeful and nourishing. There seems to be an increased feeling of community and looking out for each other. And I have been touched by the strength and composure of people facing untenable situations.

Finally, hats off to my staff. I am very grateful for the dedication and commitment of the folks who work out of our constituency office on East Esplanade - when they are not, of course, working virtually from home.

Let’s stay the course and we’ll all be back together soon.

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