

OGGO | November 14, 2022

PHAC Opening Remarks

Vice President Jennifer Lutfallah

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee today.

My role as Vice President of Health Security and Regional Operations within the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) is to oversee the policy development, operations, and legislative requirements for implementing border public health measures.

To examine the need and benefits of the ArriveCAN app from a health perspective, it is pivotal to understand the context in which the Public Health Agency operated.

At the onset of the pandemic, monitoring health measures at the border was a paper-based process.

In early 2020, the Government of Canada implemented a series of enhanced border measures to slow the introduction and transmission of COVID-19 into Canada, through Orders in Council.

The land and air ports of entry, which saw a few thousand travellers per year that required additional health measures at the border pre COVID were now administering enhanced COVID requirements that applied to all travellers entering Canada. The manual, paper-based way of operating pre COVID was not scalable to collect contact, vaccination and quarantine information from all travellers entering Canada, given the traveller volumes.

It was a cumbersome, labour-intensive process. Further exacerbating the process was the collection of forms using biohazard protocols as this was the period in the pandemic when there was suspicion that the virus could live on paper.

Collecting, organizing and shipping paper forms across the country, digitizing and inputting information into PHAC systems could take upwards of 14 days. Incomplete and illegible forms further complicated matters.

Information was shared with provinces and territories to identify travellers quarantining in their jurisdictions and was intended to be used to contact travellers to verify their compliance with quarantine requirements however, it could not be provided for the most part, in a timely way.

It is within this context that ArriveCAN was created in spring 2020 as a joint initiative between PHAC and the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA).

As the science evolved so too did the technology.

Initially, ArriveCAN was a digitized version of the paper Traveller Contact Information form that travellers were completing upon arrival to Canada.

Collecting information remotely, prior to a traveller's arrival, minimized the number of questions that the CBSA Border Services Officer (BSO) had to ask each traveller, thus speeding up processing times while also limiting the exposure of BSOs to each incoming traveller.

In a public health crisis, time and information are critical. With the paper forms, PHAC had actionable information on average, day five to day eight of a traveller's quarantine; with ArriveCAN, useful data was available within 48 hours.

In late 2020, the decision to make an ArriveCAN submission mandatory for air travellers, and subsequently for all travellers in early 2021 further facilitated PHAC's ability to administer border measures with the goal of mitigating the importation and spread of COVID-19 associated with international travel.

By 2021, as border measures evolved quickly to respond to the Omicron variant, so too did ArriveCAN. Travel history data were used to identify recent arrivals from Countries of Concern. PHAC was subsequently able to contact those travellers individually by email and phone, ask them to test, and to quarantine. This response would not have been possible without ArriveCAN.

The need to take timely action drove innovation. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the development of a more efficient process to manage large volumes of health data and accelerated the need to design and implement creative ways to streamline data collection.

The ArriveCAN tool evolved with the pandemic, adopting changes as required when Orders in Council changed to reflect the advice, as well as the trajectory of the pandemic. It improved the quality of the scientific data PHAC collected, which supported decision-making and allowed the crucial exchange of information with provinces and territories.

Overall, there were 80 different Orders in Council issued during the course of over two and a half years to respond to the evolving pandemic.

Without ArriveCAN, Canada's ability to administer the border measures put in place by the Government of Canada to protect public health would have been significantly reduced.

In closing – ArriveCAN evolved to a streamlined and digitized tool to expedite the public health border measures at Canada's ports of entry from the beginning of the pandemic—before vaccines and countermeasures, and when little was known about the emerging variants—and continued to evolve later in the pandemic when travellers resumed their pre-pandemic volumes.