
FISCAL UPDATE Article

Fiscal Services Division

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NCSL WEBINAR — COVID-19: GUIDANCE FOR EASING STATE RESTRICTIONS

Webinar Series. On April 24, 2020, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) held a webinar providing guidance related to easing state restrictions established as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The information in this article is current as of the date of the webinar.

Federal Guidelines. In his daily press briefing on April 16, 2020, President Trump presented federal guidelines, titled “Opening Up America Again,” for individual states to begin a phase-approach to restart the American economy. The guidelines, which provide three separate phases for reopening various business, healthcare, and service sectors, rely on six specific metrics. The White House underscored that each state may need to tailor the application of these metrics based on local circumstances and that governors should work on a regional level to determine individual metric progress. In order for a state to begin the process of reopening various businesses and services, the following criteria must be met:

- 1) The state must experience a downward trajectory of influenza-like illnesses (ILI) reported within a 14-day period.
- 2) The state must experience a downward trajectory of COVID-19-like syndromic cases reported within a 14-day period.
- 3) State data must provide evidence of a downward trajectory of documented cases within a 14-day period, or must provide evidence of a downward trajectory of positive tests as a percent of total tests within a 14-day period (flat or increasing volume of tests).
- 4) Hospitals must be able to treat all patients without utilizing crisis care.
- 5) Robust testing programs, including testing for antibodies, must be in place for all at-risk healthcare workers.

Once these criteria have been met, a state may choose to enter into the first of three phases. Each phase is required to last at least 14 days and is divided into guidelines for individuals, general employers, and specific employers such as schools, healthcare systems, gyms, and bars. All phases are based on up-to-date data and readiness factors and should mitigate resurgence risk, protect the most vulnerable, and rely on individual governor discretion as to implementation on a county-by-county or statewide basis.

- **Phase One** retains social distancing measures, but allows some larger venues such as restaurants, places of worship and some sports venues to operate under strict sanitary and physical distance guidelines.
- **Phase Two** may be entered as long as there is no evidence of a COVID-19 infection resurgence and allows nonessential travel to begin. It also allows schools and bars to open, but under certain social distancing regulatory circumstances.
- **Phase Three** allows for unrestricted staffing of worksites and public interactions utilizing social distancing measures. Visits to healthcare centers and hospitals may resume, and venues such as bars may relax some of their capacity standards.

Additional information is available at: www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/#criteria.

Building the Public Health Infrastructure. The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), a national nonprofit organization that represents public health agencies all over the United States, the U.S. Territories, and the District of Columbia, recently published several policy briefs that provide guidelines for establishing a coordinated, national approach to scaling public health capacity for contact tracing and disease investigation related to the outbreak of COVID-19, as well as guidelines specific to future findings. Michael Fraser, ASTHO Chief Executive Officer, underscored that there are three key elements related to building up public health infrastructure in order to limit new and existing outbreaks of COVID-19 in addition to social distancing and other mitigation efforts. These three elements include:

- 1) Ensure advanced testing capacity and adequate personal protective equipment levels to provide to essential workers.
- 2) Utilize contact tracing as a core strategy with teams of individuals who have the specific skillsets and tools to establish a contact investigation workforce. Positions with specific skills may include a lay or paraprofessional contact tracer position, a professional disease investigator specialist position, and a healthcare provider such as an epidemiologist or clinical specialist.
- 3) Focus on public mitigation and helping policymakers understand various risks related to future outbreaks and healthcare surges.

Association of State and Territorial Health Officials encourages states to consider hiring trained individuals within affected communities who may have been furloughed or laid off, or partnering with local colleges, universities, or community organizations. Additionally, ASTHO highlighted other state programs such as Massachusetts' Community Tracing Collaborative and encouraged other states to utilize these informed approaches in their response to COVID-19.

Additional information can be found at: www.astho.org/COVID-19.

Creating and Executing a Plan to Gradually Reopen the Economy. With assistance from ASTHO, the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices recently published guidelines for gradually reopening the American economy on a state-by-state level entitled "Roadmap to Recovery: A Public Health Guide for Governors." Presenting many guidelines regarding testing capacity, public healthcare surveillance, scaling contact tracing, and establishing risk policies for potential healthcare surges, the NGA also emphasizes developing a strong and clear communication plan to keep the public engaged and informed. The NGA recommends that governors consider the following:

- Regularly hold press conferences to explain the status of the pandemic and key steps being taken to protect the public.
- Create the opportunity for extensive public engagement about plans for reopening the economy.
- Collaborate with other trusted individuals, including physicians, nurses, business leaders, public health experts, community leaders, nonprofit organizations, and faith leaders, as well as persons from communities who have recovered from COVID-19 infection.

Additionally, the NGA has also provided considerations for governors on how to establish a framework for reopening their state's economy that includes ongoing public engagement and input, the possible development of an online tool such as a dashboard or metric measuring system to provide progress and information, and building partnerships between public and private sectors to implement plans to reopen businesses and services.

Additional information can be found at: www.nga.org/center/publications/health/roadmap-to-recovery.

Additional NCSL Resources. A recording of the webinar, as well as a copy of the webinar slides, can be found at: www.ncsl.org/research/health/covid-19-guidance-for-easing-state-restrictions.aspx.

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