

Baker Extends Business Closures Until May 18

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

Forms Panel to Explore "Phased Reopening" Details

Chris Lisinski 4/28/20 3:39 PM

APRIL 28, 2020.....Most public life in Massachusetts will remain shut down until at least May 18, but the state could begin a cautious "phased reopening" after that point based on forthcoming recommendations from a new panel, Gov. Charlie Baker announced Tuesday.



Baker extended two executive orders, one requiring non-essential businesses to keep their physical businesses closed to workers, customers and the public and another prohibiting events with more than 10 people. He also extended an advisory that residents stay at home for public health safety whenever possible.

Without action, the orders were set to expire on May 4.

During his daily press conference, Baker said he recognizes the closures -- which [also include](#) physical shuttering of schools through the end of the academic year and non-emergency child care closures until June 29 -- carry significant economic consequences. He defended the steps as necessary, though, to save lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I know pushing these dates back a couple of weeks is probably not what everybody wants to hear," Baker said. "We all look forward to stepping in front of this podium to tell you we're starting to open for business. I know

we'll get there soon, but we have to be smart about how we do it and recognize and understand there are risks associated with opening too soon."

The social-distanced status quo that has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic will continue for several more weeks as a result of Baker's announcement. On Tuesday, the administration also outlined some steps about how Massachusetts will move forward.

Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito and Housing and Economic Development Secretary Mike Kennealy will lead a new 17-member advisory board tasked with drafting what Baker called "new rules of the road" for reviving economic activity and easing stay-at-home recommendations.

The panel [comprises](#) Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel and two other public health experts, three municipal officials, Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack and 10 other business leaders.

Members will hold their first meeting Tuesday afternoon, Polito said, and will submit recommendations by the May 18 expiration of the extensions to help guide next steps.

"We will develop the planning tool that will be the roadmap for reopening in a phased, smart and safe manner," Polito said. "The top priority remains the health and safety of Massachusetts residents, and our plan to reopen will include guidance for things like sanitized shared spaces, realistic social distancing protocols for customers and employees, and expanded access to testing."

The governor floated several ideas the advisory group could explore, such as staggering work schedules to help avoid crowding on public transportation.

Baker and Polito stressed that any reopening will proceed on a gradual basis, with the governor adding that "it's not going to be everybody all at once." Businesses most likely to succeed under the new conditions are likely to get the green light the soonest, they said.

Some employees may face challenges returning to work with schools closed and with child care unavailable until June 29, a concern Senate President Karen Spilka flagged earlier Tuesday.

Asked if daycares could open up before the June 29 expiration of his executive order, Baker replied, "It's going to depend a lot on the conversation with the daycare community generally and what we get from the business community and how phased in the phased opening actually is."

More than six weeks into the pandemic, many states have [taken steps](#) to move past distancing requirements and public shutdowns in varying degrees. Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo outlined [tentative plans](#) Monday to lift a stay-at-home order on May 9 and gradually restore business activity.

Massachusetts will work with Rhode Island and other Northeast and mid-Atlantic states in a regional partnership to collaborate on reopening steps, something Baker said is key so that "none of us does anything that unwittingly puts the others in a bad space."

Some officials in states such as Georgia and Florida have more rapidly pushed for easing restrictions, while others -- including Baker -- have cited the public-health importance of proceeding slowly.

"We're all incredibly eager to move on from this phase of our lives, but if we act too soon, we could risk a spike in infections that could force our state to revert to serious restrictions again, and this scenario would be far worse for our economy and for our communities and for our people," Baker said, later adding, "if you don't see any downward trends, you are running a terrible risk by walking away from what is known to be a very effective strategy to slow the spread."

Through Monday afternoon, the Department of Public Health [confirmed](#) more than 56,000 COVID-19 cases in Massachusetts over the course of the outbreak and counted 3,892 patients currently hospitalized, more than 1,000 of which were in intensive care units.

More than 3,000 Bay State residents have died as a result of the illness. Most of those who have died are older, but Baker cautioned that people of all ages have been infected and hospitalized.

Baker said again Tuesday that the state has "plateaued" in the spread of the highly infectious virus, but officials want to see hospitalization rates decrease before they will feel comfortable moving forward.

"We've basically been flat for 12 days," Baker said. "We're flat at a high level. 13 days, counting today. You're not going to find a lot of other places that just sit like this for 13 days."

-END-

04/28/2020