

Governor's Remarks 4/20/20

Good afternoon, everyone. Today I'm joined by Lieutenant Governor Geoff Duncan, Speaker David Ralston, General Tom Carden, Dr. Kathleen Toomey, and GEMA Director Homer Bryson. As of noon today, we now have 18,947 COVID-19 cases in Georgia with 733 deaths. The state lab has processed 5,362 tests, and commercial vendors have processed 78,966 tests. We understand that these are more than just numbers. These are Georgians. These are families and communities impacted. Our prayers remain with the victims and their loved ones. We lift up those who are battling this terrible virus. We remain focused on the safety and well-being of every person who calls Georgia home.

Last week, the White House issued guidelines for states to begin to safely reopen our nation's economy. We appreciate their leadership and share in the President's desire to reopen the economy and get Americans back to work. As a small business person for over thirty years, I know the impact of this pandemic on hardworking Georgians in every zip code and every community. With heightened supply and limited demand, crops are rotting and farmers are struggling to keep employees on the payroll. Our small business owners are seeing sales plummet, and the company that they built with blood, sweat, and tears disappear right before them. Contract workers are struggling to put food on the table. Our large businesses, which serve as anchors in many Georgia towns, are scaling back operations, leaving some with reduced hours and others with no job. These are tough moments in our state and nation. I hear the concerns of those I am honored to serve. I see the terrible impact of COVID-19 on public health and the pocketbook. Informed by the Coronavirus Task Force and public health officials, "Opening Up America Again" includes three phases to safely reopen and get folks back to work. To initiate Phase One, a state must meet a series of basic criteria, which can be tailored to reflect specific circumstances for a regional or statewide approach.

For weeks now, our state has taken targeted action to prevent, detect, and address the spread of coronavirus by leveraging data and advice from health officials in the public and private sectors. Thanks to this methodical approach and the millions of Georgians who have worked diligently to slow the spread of coronavirus, we are on track to meet the gating criteria for Phase One. According to the Department of Public Health, reports of emergency room visits for flu-like illnesses are declining, documented COVID-19 cases have flattened and appear to be declining, and we have seen declining emergency room visits in general. By expanding our hospital bed capacity - including the temporary facility at the Georgia World Congress Center - we have the ability to treat patients without crisis care in hospital settings. Our proactive actions have reduced stress and strain on area hospitals as well as the communities and families that they serve.

Now, a key component of the gating criteria is testing. For weeks, I have expressed my frustration with the status of testing and committed more resources to expansion. We partnered with the University System of Georgia, partnered with the private sector to offer drive-thru services, and recently empowered public health departments across

Georgia to offer testing for all symptomatic individuals. Today we're taking this effort to the next level by announcing an even broader partnership with the state's dedicated health sciences university and its health system to double down on our testing capacity and meet the requirements necessary to move forward with the President's Plan.

As many of you know, Augusta University Health launched a telemedicine app as part of their comprehensive plan to screen, test, and treat Georgia patients through an algorithm designed by experts at the Medical College of Georgia. This app has enhanced public health while reducing exposure for our doctors, nurses, and medical staff. We are encouraging symptomatic Georgians to download the app this week and begin the screening process. Georgians can access the app by visiting AugustaHealth.org or downloading AU Health ExpressCare on your smartphone. You can also call (706) 721-1852. This free app is user-friendly and through this app, physicians and advanced practice providers from Augusta University Health and the Medical College of Georgia are available to users twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. If you begin to display symptoms consistent with COVID-19 - day or night - you can log onto AU Health's telemedicine app or call to get screened by a clinician. If you meet criteria for testing, staff will contact you to schedule a test at one of the state's designated testing locations near your home. Your healthcare information will be securely transmitted to your designated testing site.

This streamlined process reduces stress on both the patient and testing site workers. Once you arrive for your appointment, you will provide a specimen for testing. From there, we will leverage the power of several key academic institutions in the state to process tests. These include Augusta University, Emory University, Georgia State University, and the Georgia Public Health Lab. In roughly seventy-two hours, you will be able to access your test results via a secure patient portal, and a medical provider will contact you directly if you are positive. The clinician will assist you with enrolling in a self-reporting app by Google named MTX where - with patient consent - the Department of Public Health can use enhanced contact monitoring and tracing. Through this partnership, Augusta University will produce testing swabs in the Dental College of Georgia innovation lab. By using the same 3-D printers that have produced face shields for healthcare workers, the innovation lab will create thousands of swabs per day. This capability greatly reduces our dependence on vendors and governmental entities as we boost testing and get Georgians back into the workplace. Under the leadership of President Brooks Keel, CEO Katrina Keefer, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Philip Coule, General Carden, and Dr. Toomey, Augusta University will roll out this app statewide over the course of this week. My office will release more details and timelines soon.

In addition, the Georgia National Guard will mobilize ten new strike teams to deploy to hotspots and long-term care facilities to administer 1,500 tests per day. Testing expansions through Augusta University and the Guard will complement existing initiatives, including the Department of Public Health's capacity, Georgia Tech's CVS testing site, and private labs. As I've said before, testing defines the battlefield and informs our long-term strategy. These efforts significantly increase our capacity as we take measured steps forward. Throughout this entire process from creating the

Coronavirus Task Force to today, we have relied on data, science, and the advice of healthcare professionals to guide our approach and decision-making. We have been surgical, targeted, and methodical, always putting the health and well-being of our citizens first, and doing our best to protect lives - and livelihoods - in every part of Georgia.

In the same way that we carefully closed businesses and urged operations to end to mitigate the virus' spread, today, we are announcing plans to incrementally - and safely - reopen sectors of our economy. To help in the battle against COVID-19, healthcare facilities across Georgia voluntarily paused elective surgeries to reduce equipment and personnel shortages. This selfless act by healthcare leaders enhanced our ability to keep Georgians safe. However, many now find themselves in a difficult financial situation, some losing millions of dollars a day as they sacrifice for the greater good. This is not sustainable long-term for these facilities. Given the recent changes in modeling as it relates to surge capacity and national supply as the needs of other states diminish and following weeks of discussions with hospital leaders and medical providers. I believe Georgia is positioned to secure the necessary personal protective equipment for healthcare facilities to resume elective surgeries deemed essential.

Hospitals should continue discussions in their regions to ensure that patient safety - and the safety of their workforce - is prioritized. I applaud all of the hospitals, ambulatory surgical centers, doctors' offices, dentists' offices, physical therapists, and healthcare professionals that answered the call of duty and voluntarily closed their doors. It is impossible for me to adequately express my gratitude. And to all of the Georgians who waited on getting an important procedure to allow us to get on the other side of the curve, thank you. Your sacrifice saved lives.

Given the favorable data, enhanced testing, and approval of our healthcare professionals, we will allow gyms, fitness centers, bowling alleys, body art studios, barbers, cosmetologists, hair designers, nail care artists, estheticians, their respective schools, and massage therapists to reopen their doors this Friday, April 24, 2020. Unlike other businesses, these entities have been unable to manage inventory, deal with payroll, and take care of administrative items while we shelter in place. This measure allows them to undertake baseline operations that most other businesses in the state have maintained since I issued the shelter-in-place order. This measure will apply statewide and will be the operational standard in all jurisdictions.

This means local action cannot be taken that is more or less restrictive. Over the next few days, we will continue to closely monitor existing and potential hotspots in our state. I stay in regular contact with local leaders across Georgia, especially those in Dougherty County, to ensure that we are providing adequate support. Right now, in Albany and Dougherty County, we are starting to see improvements. I talk to Commission Chairman Chris Cohilas on a regular basis to see if further action is warranted. Rest assured, if any community needs the state to intervene, we will do so with their input and partnership.

The next point is an important one. The entities that I am reopening are not reopening for "business as usual." Each of these entities will be subject to specific restrictions, including adherence to Minimum Basic Operations, social distancing, and regular

sanitation. Minimum Basic Operations includes, but is not limited to, screening workers for fever and respiratory illness, enhancing workplace sanitation, wearing masks and gloves if appropriate, separating workspaces by at least six feet, teleworking where at all possible, and implementing staggered shifts.

Subject to specific social distancing and sanitation mandates, theaters, private social clubs, and restaurant dine-in services will be allowed to reopen on Monday, April 27. We will release more information in the next few days. Bars, nightclubs, operators of amusement park rides, and live performance venues will remain closed. In the days ahead, we will be evaluating the data and conferring with public health officials to determine the best course of action for those establishments. By taking this measured action, we will get Georgians back to work safely without undermining the progress that we have all made in the battle against COVID-19.

Today's announcement is a small step forward and should be treated as such. The shelter in place order is still active and will expire at 11:59 PM on April 30 for most Georgians. We urge everyone to continue to follow CDC and DPH guidance by sheltering in place as often as you can. Limit your travel and limit who goes with you on errands to prevent potential exposure. If possible, wear face masks or cloth coverings when you are in public to slow the spread of coronavirus. For medically fragile and elderly Georgians, make plans to shelter in place at least through May 13 - the date Georgia's Public Health Emergency expires. Given the heightened risk of adverse consequences from your exposure to coronavirus, this is the recommended - and safest - path forward. We will release more details as we near the end of the month so medically fragile and elderly Georgians will have adequate time to prepare. I continue to call on my fellow Georgians to protect our elderly, limit your direct contact, and help them navigate the weeks ahead. We're helping my mom during this time to ensure that she doesn't have to go out, and I urge Georgians to do the same for their loved ones if they're able.

Do what you can to help those in need. For places of worship, holding in-person services is allowed, but under Phase One guidelines, it must be done in accordance with strict social distancing protocols. I urge faith leaders to continue to help us in this effort and keep their congregations safe by heeding the advice of public health officials. Of course, online, call-in, or drive-in services remain good options for religious institutions.

While I am encouraged by the data, proud of what we have accomplished, and confident of our plan moving forward, I know that the journey ahead is long. We must remain laser-focused on defeating this virus and keeping Georgians safe. We must find ways to revitalize communities devastated by COVID-19. We must identify opportunities for economic growth and prosperity. We will have tough conversations about the budget, state spending, and our priorities and values as a state. Those conversations are underway, and here's what I know. If we remain united just as we have in this fight against COVID-19, we can overcome the challenges and obstacles ahead. But if we allow politics, partisanship, elections, and egos to divide us during this important inflection point, our entire state will suffer. So, as we begin this process - this measured, deliberate step forward - let's reaffirm our commitment to each other to the greater good and to Georgia's future. I am confident that together, we will emerge victorious from this war. With your help and God's grace, we will build a safer, stronger, and more prosperous

state for our families and generations to come. Thank you, and God Bless... Now, I'll turn it over to Lieutenant Governor Duncan for brief remarks.