

As coronavirus cases increase rapidly, Pa. businesses must close unless they're 'life-sustaining;' officials give dire warnings

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Body

March 19--As the number of coronavirus cases in Pennsylvania and New Jersey neared 1,000, Gov. Tom Wolf on Thursday ordered all businesses in the commonwealth that aren't "life-sustaining" to close. And Gov. Phil Murphy, pressing the federal government for regional aid with the leaders of neighboring states, said the region may need a \$100 billion bailout by the time the pandemic passes.

And that time -- which experts say is likely "months, not weeks" away -- could get farther off as cases increase "rapidly," particularly if people don't heed warnings to close businesses and stay home, officials warned Thursday.

"We are keenly aware of the economic impact of this pandemic," Pennsylvania Health Secretary Rachel Levine said. "The human toll could be much, much worse."

Wolf extended his shutdown order to apply to the physical operation of all businesses except grocery stores, gas stations, healthcare facilities, transit systems, and similar enterprises. Restaurants are still allowed to offer take-out service; bars must be closed.

Effective Saturday, "enforcement actions will be taken" against any other businesses that stay physically open, according to an order the governor signed Thursday. The governor's office issued a list of businesses that must close, including car dealers, lawn and garden stores, specialty food stores, and furniture stores. His order also applies to offices providing legal, accounting, architectural, and tax services.

The governors of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and Connecticut are asking the federal government for a regional bailout package that Murphy said would need to be more than \$100 billion to blunt the economic impact of the crisis.

Murphy also pressed Trump for block grants on a call Thursday, said he planned to speak with Vice President Mike Pence to urge the federal government to provide states with more protective equipment and supplies, and was set to meet with the Army Corps of Engineers about building temporary hospitals.

"No one state, never mind New Jersey, has enough money to continue to do what we're doing," the governor said. "The meter is running, and it's running in a big way."

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Meanwhile, Philadelphia officials, along with local nonprofit and business groups, announced a new fund launching with \$6.5 million to help people struggling because of the pandemic.

Pennsylvania confirmed 185 cases of the coronavirus and New Jersey confirmed 742 on Thursday. More than half of New Jersey's patients are or have been hospitalized.

That state's number almost doubled with 318 new positives since Wednesday, partly because of increased testing and partly because of community spread, New Jersey officials said. The number of cases is expected to rise "exponentially" as more testing becomes available, they said.

"This is about to get real," said Philadelphia Health Commissioner Thomas Farley. "We expect that many people in Philadelphia will get this infection."

At an afternoon briefing, Mayor Jim Kenney did not rule out the possibility of a shelter-in-place order, as some other counties around the country have implemented, but said he would defer to Gov. Tom Wolf.

"Some dire situations may be coming," Kenney said. "If we get to that place, that's what we'll have to do."

Of Philadelphia's 44 reported coronavirus patients, 20 are healthcare workers, Farley said. Doctors and nurses around the world -- and in Philadelphia -- have begun pleading on social media for people to stay home to reduce the spread of the virus and keep hospitals from becoming overwhelmed.

"We stayed at work for you. Please stay home for us," read signs held up by a group of emergency room nurses at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center who posed for a photo that was shared on Facebook.

The number of coronavirus cases nationally surpassed 13,000 on Thursday, and Italy's death toll of 3,400 people surpassed that of China's Hubei Province, the initial epicenter of the outbreak, according to Johns Hopkins University. The U.S. told Americans not to travel internationally and urged those abroad to consider returning or stay in place, raising its global travel advisory to the highest warning level.

New Jersey's death toll reached nine; one person has died in Pennsylvania. Officials in both states confirmed the virus is now spreading among the public, and Bucks County saw its first instances of what officials believe to be community-spread cases, officials said Thursday.

Murphy ordered all personal-care businesses such as hair salons and spas to close by 8 p.m. Thursday, expanding on his directives earlier in the week for casinos, entertainment venues, and indoor malls to close until further notice.

He also signed a bill into law suspending evictions and foreclosures statewide and ordered all local elections scheduled in March and April to be held by mail on May 12. All voters living in a locality with a May 12 election will receive a mail-in ballot, even if they have not requested one, and no polling places will be open, Secretary of State Tahesha Way said.

Meanwhile, the Pennsylvania Department of Education canceled all state standardized tests, including the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment and Keystone exams, this year, joining several states that have done so as schools remain shut down. The department is seeking waivers from the federal rules that require the tests.

Relief in a different form was announced in Philadelphia, where the \$6.5 million PHL COVID-19 Fund was launched to hand out in grants to nonprofit organizations assisting vulnerable populations in Philadelphia, Montgomery, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Camden, and Burlington Counties.

Kenney said many area nonprofits are needed more than ever, but are worried that they will not have the money to meet their payrolls and remain in operation. The fund already has money committed to it by the city, the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, the Philadelphia Foundation, and other groups, Kenney said, and fundraising will continue.

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Kenney also urged Philadelphia's Chinese American community to report instances of racism if they face threats.

"We need to know about that so we can deploy our police to keep them safe," he said.

On Wednesday, fear among Chinatown business owners and harassment of Chinese Philadelphians prompted the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation to request additional police presence in the area. President Donald Trump has repeatedly referred to coronavirus as the "China virus," saying doing so is not racist even as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns against stigmatizing any group of people by associating them with the virus.

Officials also encouraged young people to take the virus seriously and not to consider themselves immune or invulnerable.

"There are definitely young people who will have severe illness," Farley said. "There are young people who will die with this infection so they need to be aware of that."

As of Thursday afternoon, 14 testing sites were operating for people with symptoms in Philadelphia, Farley said, and 19 were expected to be open by early next week. City officials also said they hope to open a testing site for healthcare workers and people over 50 at the stadium complex in South Philadelphia on Friday, with help from state and federal officials.

Penn Medicine told employees it would begin on Friday screening all employees for a fever and symptoms of coronavirus infection before they can enter the system's six hospitals and other patient care locations.

In Montgomery County, where the number of confirmed cases has climbed to 55, a new drive-through testing site on Temple University's Ambler campus will open Saturday, officials said. Testing is only available for people who meet specific criteria.

And Wolf approved an agreement that will allow Chester County's health department to serve Delaware County during the pandemic. Officials have said the arrangement allows for faster distribution of information about individual cases and will increase capacity for testing, investigating positive cases, and designating quarantines.

"We are ready, willing, able, and quite honored to do what is truly a public health response in opening up our boundaries and serving a critical area in Pennsylvania," said Jeanne Casner, Chester County's health director.

Staff writers Vinny Vella, Erin McCarthy, Ellie Silverman, Maddie Hanna, Sean Walsh, Marie McCullough, Rob Tornoe, and Michaelle Bond and Sarah Anne Hughes of Spotlight PA contributed to this story.

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