

White House Blocks C.D.C. Guidance Over Economic and Religious Concerns

Detailed guidelines for reopening drafted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were blocked from publication after Trump administration officials labeled them “overly prescriptive.”



By [Abby Goodnough](#) and [Maggie Haberman](#)

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WASHINGTON — As President Trump rushes to reopen the economy, a battle has erupted between the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention over the agency’s detailed guidelines to help schools, restaurants, churches and other establishments safely reopen.

A copy of the C.D.C. guidance obtained by The New York Times includes sections for child care programs, schools and day camps, churches and other “communities of faith,” employers with vulnerable workers, restaurants and bars, and mass transit administrators. The recommendations include using disposable dishes and utensils at restaurants, closing every other row of seats in buses and subways while restricting transit routes among areas experiencing different levels of coronavirus infection, and separating children at school and camps into groups that should not mix throughout the day.

But White House and other administration officials rejected the recommendations over concerns that they were overly prescriptive, infringed on religious rights and risked further damaging an economy that Mr. Trump was banking on to recover quickly. One senior official at the Department of Health and Human Services with deep ties to religious conservatives objected to any controls on church services.

“Governments have a duty to instruct the public on how to stay safe during this crisis and can absolutely do so without dictating to people how they should worship God,” said Roger Severino, the director of the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office for Civil Rights, who once oversaw the DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at the Heritage Foundation.

A spokesman for the C.D.C. said the guidance was still under discussion with the White House and a revised version could be published soon.

"Over the last week, C.D.C. has been working on additional recommendations and guidance for reopening communities, returning to public events, and I expect, even today, that we're going to receive a presentation on that," Vice President Mike Pence said on Thursday on a radio show broadcast in Pittsburgh. He added that what C.D.C. would be doing, as it often did, "is publishing health care guidance at CDC.gov in the very near future."

The C.D.C.'s director, Dr. Robert R. Redfield, and other leaders of the agency have had almost no public platform during the pandemic, with Dr. Deborah L. Birx, an infectious diseases expert coordinating the White House's coronavirus response, and Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, another member of the coronavirus task force who is the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, handling most of the public speaking on the federal public health response, usually at briefings dominated by Mr. Trump. After the C.D.C. recommended the public wear masks, Mr. Trump said he probably would not do so, even as he announced the guidelines.

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The rejection of the C.D.C.'s guidelines for reopening is the latest confusing signal as the Trump administration struggles to balance the president's desire to quickly reopen the country against the advice of public health experts, who have counseled reopening methodically through a series of steps tied to reduced rates of infection and expanded efforts to control the spread of the coronavirus.

This week, the White House signaled it would wind down its coronavirus task force only to reverse course amid a public outcry. Last week, Mr. Pence refused to wear a surgical mask at the Mayo Clinic, then apologized.

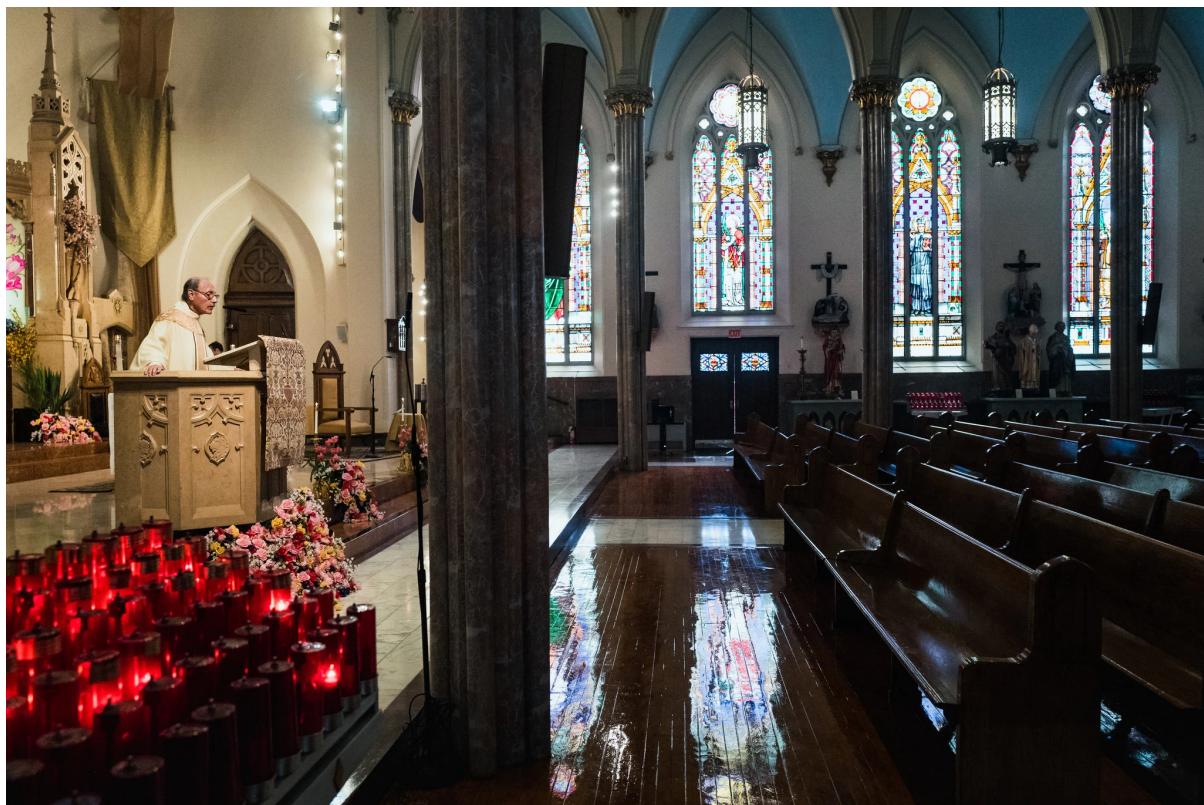
The mixed signals extend to reopening guidelines: On April 16, Mr. Trump's coronavirus task force released broad guidance for states to reopen in three phases, based on case levels and hospital capacity. But some members of the task force and other aides saw the more detailed C.D.C. guidance as a document that could slow down the reopening effort, according to several people with knowledge of the deliberations inside the West Wing.

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To date, 24 states, mostly in the South, Great Plains and Interior West, have begun allowing certain businesses to reopen, sometimes only in certain counties. Many more have businesses that are set to reopen or stay-at-home orders that could lift in the next week or two.

In a senior staff meeting last week at the White House, Mark Meadows, the chief of staff, expressed concern that the guidelines were too uniform and rigid for places with minimal numbers of cases, according to a person familiar with the discussion.



Msgr. Guy Massie speaking to an empty church, while streaming his service online, on Easter in Brooklyn. Ryan Christopher Jones for The New York Times

Particularly contentious were the C.D.C.'s recommendations for churches and other houses of worship. Mr. Severino vocally opposed them.

"Protections against religious discrimination aren't suspended during an emergency," he said in a statement on Thursday. "This means the federal government cannot single out religious conduct as somehow being more dangerous or worthy of scrutiny than comparable secular behavior."

The recommendations for churches include encouraging all congregants to wear cloth face coverings when inside the building, offering video streaming or drive-in options for services and considering "suspending use of a choir or musical ensemble" during services. It also urges churches to consider "temporarily limiting the sharing of frequently touched objects," like hymnals, prayer books and passed collection baskets.

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- **What should I do if I feel sick?**

If you've been exposed to the coronavirus or think you have, and have a fever or symptoms like a cough or difficulty breathing, call a doctor. They should give you advice on whether you should be tested, how to get tested, and how to seek medical treatment without potentially infecting or exposing others.

- **When will this end?**

This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is

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