Gov. Wolf Unveils Plan for Pennsylvania's COVID-19 Recovery

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Economy, Education, Press Release, Public Health

Today, Governor Tom Wolf announced a Plan for Pennsylvania that will provide citizens and businesses relief, allow for a safe and expedient reopening, and lay a road to recovery from the challenges and hardships created by the 2019 novel coronavirus.

"I asked for you to close schools and businesses, cancel large events, stay at home, all in an effort to simply keep our friends, our neighbors, our families, our coworkers, alive," said Gov. Wolf. "I will be forever grateful for your courage, compassion, and speed. Despite uncertainty, Pennsylvanians acted collectively, not because of any order, but because we care deeply for each other. Now I am asking again for you to believe in our Commonwealth."

Relief for Pennsylvanians

The Wolf Administration has taken broad and far-reaching actions to help meet the short- and long-term needs of individual Pennsylvanians in the face of this unprecedented pandemic. Ensuring that Pennsylvanians from all walks of life have access to the resources they need has been and will continue to be a top priority of the governor.

Food Insecurity

- Worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure that individuals in need of food no longer need to complete cumbersome paperwork and income verification to prove they are eligible for or in need.
- Extended Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) certification periods for six months to prevent SNAP case closures.
- Begun to issue emergency allotments to all SNAP households for March and April 2020, increasing the current monthly allotment.
- Lifted burdensome requirements for the State Food Purchase Program to provide flexibility in determining eligibility.
- Partnered with United Way PA 211 to make available a comprehensive list of COVID-19-specific food resources.
- Launched a partnership with Operation BBQ Relief and the Salvation Army to deliver more than 700,000 meals to all corners of the commonwealth.
- Boosted food bank supplies by directing $2.6 million to charitable food programs through the Neighborhood Assistance Program.
- Procured 750,000 shelf-stable meals through the Defense Logistics Agency to food banks and senior home-delivered meal programs.
- Worked to ensure that free school meal programs are transitioned into take-home or community distribution programs to meet food and nutrition needs of students.
- The PA Department of Transportation (PennDOT) has repurposed staff to provide additional workforce capacity for food banks across the state struggling to attract volunteers.

Student Loan Debt

- Federal student loan borrowers are automatically being placed in an administrative forbearance, temporarily stopping monthly payments through September 30, 2020. Payments can still be made if borrowers choose.
- The Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) is notifying borrowers that forbearance for the American Education Services (AES) and commercial loan portfolio is available upon request through September 30, 2020.

Individuals Who Have Been Furloughed, Laid Off, or Have Reduced Hours

In addition to regular state Unemployment Compensation (UC) benefits, which provide roughly half of an individual's full-time weekly income up to $572 per week, the federal CARES Act expanded UC benefits through several new programs:

- Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) expands benefits to gig-economy workers, independent contractors, and self-employed individuals who are otherwise ineligible for UC.
- Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (FPUC) provides an additional $600 per week, on top of regular UC benefits, to all UC recipients.
- Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) provides an additional 13 weeks of UC benefits to individuals who exhaust their regular 26 weeks of benefits, for a total of 39 weeks of coverage.

Individuals Who Are Uninsured or Underinsured

- Announced all major health insurers providing comprehensive medical coverage in the commonwealth will cover medically appropriate COVID-19 diagnostic testing and associated treatment for consumers and have committed to waive any cost-sharing for the testing.
- In addition, many auto and homeowners insurers are giving money back to drivers who are spending less time on the road and placing moratoriums on canceling policies amid financial hardships.
- Made telehealth the preferred delivery method for medically necessary health care services for physical health, behavioral health, and substance use disorder services and explained that telephone only services may be used where video technology is not available. All Medical Assistance services delivered via telehealth are being reimbursed at the same level as in-person services.
- Established a 24/7 mental health crisis line that received more than 1,300 calls in the first 10 days.

Students and Families

In this time of unprecedented school closures, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has worked with Intermediate Units (IUs) throughout the commonwealth to develop and implement continuity of education plans to ensure seniors graduate, students can be promoted to the next grade, and all students continue to have access to remote learning through the remainder of the academic year. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has:

- Coordinated with rural communities to provide access to roving wifi buses to meet the internet and remote learning needs of students without internet access.
- Partnered with the statewide leads for PBS to offer communities with limited internet access use of free instructional programming that is being broadcast by all of Pennsylvania's PBS affiliates.
- The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) has worked with local communities to identify and stand up child care facilities for children of health care workers, first responders, and other essential employees to ensure they can continue to respond to the COVID-19 disaster while knowing their children are being cared for.

Relief for Businesses

Pennsylvania's businesses are in an unprecedented position, many shuttered across the state to protect against the spread of the deadly coronavirus, others changing their entire business plans around to help meet the many needs of people across the state.

Many businesses have had to furlough or lay off employees, and others that have relied on in-person transactions have had to move to remote platforms overnight. While the needs are varied among the business community, the severity of the impact of the coronavirus on the overall economy is, and will remain, unforeseen for some time.

The Wolf Administration has worked diligently with federal, state, and local government partners, the business community, and other critical external partners to ensure businesses can avail themselves of all the tools available to offer a modicum of relief in the face of this crisis.

Department of Revenue

The Department of Revenue (DOR) has extended tax filing deadlines to assist with short-term liquidity for businesses. DOR has also worked to reduce or suspend enforcement actions, including liens filed will be reduced; bank attachment actions will not be taken; license inspections, revocations, and citations will be limited; and tax clearance requirements will be the more lenient debt collector standards. DOR is also providing flexible terms for new payment plans allowing up to $12,000 for up to one year.

Department of Community and Economic Development

The Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) made more than $60 million available for small businesses through the Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority (PIDA) COVID-19 Working Capital Access Program.

Although the funds were depleted in four days and the department received more than 900 applications, we are looking at ways to recapitalize the program given its need as a bridge to federal stimulus funds.

DCED has also allowed for three-month loan payment deferrals for loans administered by the department.

Banks and Mortgage Servicers

In alignment with federal CARES Act, Pennsylvania banks and mortgage servicers are implementing 60-day foreclosure moratoriums and 180-day forbearances on all federally backed loans. In addition, there is now a 120-day moratorium on evictions from properties with federally backed loans.

The PA State Treasury, the PA Department of Banking and Securities, and the PA Housing and Finance Agency have come together to develop a series of relief recommendations and are working collaboratively with banks and other creditors to push for broad flexibilities and relief actions to assist businesses and consumers across the state.

Federal CARES Act

With the passage of the federal CARES Act, businesses of all shapes and sizes will be able to access billions of dollars in federal resources to assist with everything from payroll support, more favorable loan terms, and fully refundable tax credits for businesses that are trying to keep workers employed while keeping their doors are shut to the public.

Relief for Health Care Systems and Providers

The Wolf Administration has undertaken every possible effort to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus and ensure our health care system, and the providers that make up its fabric, can withstand the ramp-up, surge, and aftermath of this deadly pandemic.

While hospitals and health systems have been promised significant financial aid from the federal government, many are facing financial strain now and need relief before those dollars become fully available. The Wolf Administration has taken steps to provide that immediate relief.

- Established the Pennsylvania Hospital Emergency Loan Program (HELP) to provide up to $450 million from the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority (PennVEST) in critical working capital bridge funding at a very low interest rate to Pennsylvania's hospitals.
- Spreading the word about the federal government's expansion of the Accelerated and Advance Payment Program for Providers and Suppliers, which provides necessary funds when there is a disruption in claims submission or processing. The expansion of this program extends to a broader group of Medicare Part A providers and Part B suppliers. The federal government announced that they have approved over $51 billion for providers across the country in the first week of the expansion program.
- Worked closely with the General Assembly to transfer $50 million in state funds to purchase medical equipment and supplies for hospitals, nursing homes, and emergency workers to help fight the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Worked with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to allow for payments for direct-support providers to assist people with disabilities in hospital settings where they may need support beyond that provided by hospital staff.
- Signed an Executive Order that allows the state to transfer personal protective equipment (PPE) and supplies between health care facilities should it become necessary as the coronavirus pandemic worsens to ensure that all health care providers have access to PPE and critical supplies and that if supplies need to be redistributed to meet the needs of communities hardest hit by the virus, it can be done efficiently and as quickly as possible.
- Supplied over 1.8 million N95 masks, 136,000 gowns, 912,000 procedure masks, 730,000 gloves, 990 goggles, and 147,000 face shields to health care workers.
- Waived requirements to allow for retired medical professionals to quickly reactivate their licenses in order to bolster the capacity of the health care workforce.
- Worked with medical schools across the commonwealth to allow Graduate Medical Trainees (GMTs) to obtain their GMT licenses upon graduation.
- Extended license renewal deadlines, and waived additional administrative requirements for new and temporary health care licensees, so that practitioners do not have to worry about their license status during the emergency.
- Working to limit the scope of potential liability for health care providers resulting from the care of patients during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Contracted with ECRI, an independent, nonprofit health services research organization, to enlist experts in the field of infection control to help protect those in the state's long-term care facilities.
- Collaborating with the Jewish Healthcare Foundation to support personal care homes and assisted living residences to provide information about infectious disease management protocols and resident care requirements.
- Partnering with university health systems to staff a phone line designed to answer specific COVID-19 related questions for these facilities and to provide real time support.

Businesses across the commonwealth have pivoted from current business models to manufacture or produce personal protective equipment (PPE), gowns, masks, and other critical supplies meant to assist individuals and communities in responding to COVID-19.

Reopening Pennsylvania

With new case counts showing that these aggressive efforts have flattened the curve, the governor and his administration will begin to plan for a reopening process that protects Pennsylvanians and helps to stabilize the economy. The administration will work with economic and public health experts to determine the metrics used for safe reopening by taking a regional, sector-based approach.

In consultation with Team PA, the Department of Health, the Department of Community and Economic Development, the Department of Labor and Industry, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, and others, the administration will develop guidance for businesses, local governments, workers, customers, and others and guide a safe reopening process.

Standards

- Our approach will be data driven and reliant upon quantifiable criteria to drive a targeted, evidence-based, regional approach to reopenings in Pennsylvania.
- We will put forth guidance and recommendations for employers, individuals, and health care facilities for assured accountability as we reopen.
- Reopening necessitates that adequate personal protective equipment and diagnostic testing are available.
- Reopening requires a monitoring and surveillance program that allows the commonwealth to be deploy swift actions for containment or mitigation.
- Protections for vulnerable populations must remain steadfast throughout the reopening process, such as limitations on visitors to congregate care facilities and prisons.
- Limitations on large gatherings unrelated to occupations should remain in place for the duration of the reopening process.

Recovery for Pennsylvanians

Developing a recovery framework and programs that make a difference for the people of Pennsylvania is paramount. That framework must include, at a minimum:

- Fair, family-sustaining wages for all Pennsylvanians.
- Expand worker protection for workers following Department of Health orders or guidance from health care providers to isolate and quarantine.
- Expand paid sick and family and medical leave policies.
- Expansion of safe, affordable, and high-quality child care.
- Strengthen the Unemployment and Workers Compensation Insurance systems.
- Funding and flexibility to support continuity of education and continued active distance learning (including planned instruction and enrichment) for all students, including a focus on equity and students with special needs.
- Accountability and transparency for spending and dispensation of federal, state, and local resources to address the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Expand student loan forgiveness and repayment programs, particularly focusing on debt relief for individuals who are the front lines of responding the COVID-19 disaster.
- Expand rapid re-employment programs to support laid off workers and businesses impacted by COVID-19-related business closures.

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Recovery for Businesses

While the plan for long-term recovery still lies ahead, there are already lessons learned from this disaster that allow us to put markers down for where we need to go once the disaster subsides. There is still much we do not know, including when businesses can begin to reopen safely. But the broad contours of a policy agenda in the future must include the following:

- Developing an evidence-based state innovation strategy that allows Pennsylvania to attract the best and brightest people and companies.
- Vigorous financial support for small businesses, both short term to limit the number of businesses that would otherwise have to close their doors for good while we shelter in place, and long term as small businesses restructure and recover in a post-COVID-19 economy.
- Economic development incentives to attract companies willing to create and retain good-paying jobs.
- Investments in our manufacturing industry who has risen to the challenge of meeting some of our most pressing and immediate needs, including tax credits for manufacturers who convert or retrofit their facilities or operations in order to produce personal protective equipment to help with the COVID-19 response.
- Investment, upgrade, and extension of Pennsylvania's broadband network to ensure all Pennsylvanians have access to the internet. This includes resources for students/families/workers and/or incentivizing businesses to expand access to broadband to support remote learning and job search activities.
- Investments in our diverse agriculture industry, robust food processing sector, farmers markets, and the many industries that support a safe food supply. While this industry is life-sustaining, it has suffered a severe disruption in its supply chain, and recovery must ensure the certainty and future of Pennsylvania's agriculture industry to continue to produce a safe, secure food supply.
- Support for non-profit organizations.

Recovery for Health Care Systems and Providers

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the fragmentations within our health systems. Pennsylvania has banned together to support and equip our hospitals and medical professionals with the tools they need to respond, but our recovery is dependent upon long-term policy change. A policy agenda to support the health and recovery of Pennsylvania's residents must include:

- Health care coverage for all Pennsylvanians that is affordable and transparent, and a system that allows for choice in coverage.
- Ensuring the protections of the Affordable Care Act are in place at the state level, to ensure that people with pre-existing conditions, including Pennsylvanians recovered from COVID-19, can obtain full coverage and not worry about lifetime or annual caps on coverage should they need further care.
- Making sure that patients who seek out in-network care aren't surprised with a bill for treatment by an out-of-network provider at an in-network facility.
- Requiring transparency in short-term limited duration insurance products and protecting consumers who need to fill an unexpected gap in coverage.
- Continue to cut bureaucratic red tape and make it easier for new Pennsylvanians, including military spouses, with an out-of-state occupational license to work. Greater flexibility is needed in licensure requirements for a broad set of out of state practitioners interested in providing care in Pennsylvania.
- Continued telehealth expansion and adoption of telehealth as a primary mode of health care delivery for physical and mental health services as well as substance use disorder treatment. New telehealth policy should be inclusive of accessible modes of communication such as telephonic delivery when other means are unavailable. Additionally, telehealth services should be reimbursed at the same rates as if the services were delivered in person.

- Significant increases in housing services and investment in low-income housing development to reduce the number of Pennsylvanians unable to be safely discharged due to lack of shelter and to promote health and wellness in community settings.
- Continued prioritization of home and community-based services to reduce congregate placements for children, individuals with disabilities, and seniors.
- Increased and more formalized role for community-based organizations in health and wellness activities and health care delivery. This pandemic has made clear that health does not begin and end in the doctor's office, let alone in a hospital, and Pennsylvania's community-based organizations have an important role to play.

For more information on the Governor's Plan for Pennsylvania visit www.governor.pa.gov/plan-for-pennsylvania/.

View this information in Spanish.