# North Dakota to allow practices to resume Nov. 30; competitions will resume Dec. 14

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**BISMARCK, N.D. (NOV. 18, 2020)** – Winter sports practices and extracurricular activities in North Dakota will be allowed to resume Nov. 30 with extra precautions, while competitions will remain suspended until Dec. 14, Gov. Doug Burgum said today in a joint announcement with House Majority Leader Chet Pollert and Senate Majority Leader Rich Wardner.

Burgum issued an executive order Friday with multiple measures designed to reduce record COVID-19 infections and record hospitalizations and take pressure off the state's strained health care providers and staff in the face of a pending capacity crisis.

The governor will issue an amended order that will allow practices to resume for high school winter sports and association, community and club sports for youth and adults starting Nov. 30. The change comes after daily consultation and collaboration between the governor and legislative leaders, constructive input from the North Dakota High School Activities Association and athletic associations, and feedback from numerous legislators, parents, school administrators, students, coaches, mental health professionals, and others concerned about the impacts of suspended activities on students' well-being.

"Our goals remain unchanged: to protect the most vulnerable, provide relief to our stressed hospitals and health care workers, keep students in school and businesses open, and preserve the winter sports season," Burgum said. "We appreciate the constructive solutions proposed by multiple districts and associations on how they will conduct practices safely, and we will continue to work with the North Dakota High School Activities Association and others on safely resuming competitions on Dec 14."

"As a former coach and educator, I understand the importance of keeping our schools open for in-person learning for students' academic well-being and keeping students engaged in athletics and other extracurricular activities that promote their mental, emotional and physical health," Wardner

said. “We believe this will address the pleas coming from hospitals across the state to take swift, immediate action to slow the spread, while also balancing the concerns we are hearing from parents and students.”

“As someone with a daughter and spouse who both work in the school system, I fully support efforts to safeguard our students, faculty and staff from COVID-19 but also appreciate the impact that suspending activities can have on our young people,” Pollert said. “We want to thank the citizens for reaching out to their legislators and we appreciate the Governor’s willingness to work together on a solution. While there will be ample time to review the state’s response to this pandemic during legislative session, today we need to come together as North Dakotans to meet the needs of our citizens.”

Active cases, hospitalizations and deaths have risen sharply in North Dakota in October and November, including 16 deaths reported today and 297 hospitalizations due to COVID-19, which are part of a total of 384 hospitalizations with COVID-19. It took the state over five months to reach 100 hospitalizations due to COVID-19 but just four more weeks to exceed 200 hospitalizations and only 13 additional days to exceed 300 hospitalizations, according to the North Dakota Department of Health. Based on the record high number of new positives in the first half of November, North Dakota hospitals project capacity constraints to escalate to possible shortages in the coming weeks.

While young adults ages 20-29 and individuals 19 and under who test positive for COVID-19 rarely require hospitalization, it’s essential for all parents and North Dakotans to understand that youth and young adults are part of the “invisible epidemic” in the rapid chain of transmission occurring in North Dakota right now, Burgum said. The actions of individuals, families and teams have direct impacts on health care workers and those they care for in hospitals and long-term care centers now and in the future, especially over the next 10 days when traditional multi-generational gatherings hold dangerous transmission possibilities.

To help avert a statewide crisis of rationing care, the order to suspend activities is focused on reducing transmissible moments, including between young people who are more likely to be asymptomatic spreaders and unknowingly infect friends, family members and others.

As COVID-19 cases have climbed in North Dakota, so have the number of positive cases for ages 0-18 to date: 103 cases in June, 399 in July, 721 in August, 1,610 in September, 3,061 in October and 3,224 through the first 17 days of November.

This growth in cases also holds among 14- to 18-year-olds, from 366 cases in August to 943 cases in September, to 1,375 cases in October, to already 1,320 cases so far in November, according to the North Dakota of Health. Schools and contact tracing have reported greater positive spread and close contact designations in sports and activities compared to classroom settings.

Additional precautions that coaches and athletic associations said they will be taking at practices to help slow the spread d and do their part to save vulnerable North Dakotans include no travel for association activities outside of their home territory, no locker room use, coaches masked at all times,

and no spectators, with facilities restricted to players, coaches and staff only.

The four-week timeframe for suspending competitions will allow two 14-day incubation cycles of the virus to pass before teams begin competing against each other.

“We’re fighting every day to protect our most vulnerable citizens, keep our businesses open, keep kids in school and save our winter sports season,” Burgum said. “And we need everyone to engage in this effort and do everything they can to help bend the curve.”

“We make this plea on behalf of our overworked and overwhelmed health care providers,” the governor added. “We understand and appreciate the concerns about the mental health needs of students, and we share them and empathize with the students who have sacrificed so much this year. We also can’t allow an unchecked spread of infections to keep growing to the point where more and more schools are forced to switch to full distance learning due to lack of teachers, which also is detrimental to students’ mental health and academic progress, and we also must consider the mental well-being of our health care workers. If we want to ease the tremendous burden on our teachers and staff, first responders, nurses and doctors, and make sure a staffed hospital bed is available for every patient – both COVID and non-COVID – who needs one until we can bridge the gap to an approved and effective vaccine, then we need to come together as friends, neighbors, and citizens and support one another through the impending challenges ahead.”

**Measures receive support**

Several statewide groups have expressed their support for mitigation measures announced Friday by Burgum and State Health Officer Dirk Wilke as effective strategies to save lives and livelihoods by reducing the spread of COVID-19.

In a letter Monday, the North Dakota Long Term Care Association thanked the governor for the mitigation strategies, which include a statewide requirement to wear face coverings in indoor businesses and public settings and outdoor public settings where physical distancing isn’t possible; capacity limits on event venues, bars and restaurants, with in-person service closed from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m.; and a four-week pause before starting winter sports and other K-12 extracurricular activities.

The Long Term Care Association estimates 1,500 health care staff not at work across North Dakota facilities because they are either COVID-19 positive, in quarantine as a close personal contact or have developed symptoms indicative of COVID-19 and are not allowed to work.

“Based on what we’ve seen in our facilities, we believe taking steps now to decrease activities in North Dakota will slow the COVID-19 spread, preserve hospital capacity and keep our essential health care workers working and caring for our residents,” the letter stated. “This action will help save lives.”

The North Dakota Hospital Association also offered its support for the mitigation measures in a letter Tuesday, noting that the significant increase in cases and hospitalizations "puts incredible stress on doctors, nurses, and support staff."

"By requiring masks, reducing restaurant and bar capacity and limiting hours, and temporarily pausing high school sports, we can slow the spread of the virus, keep schools open, and avoid hospitals being overrun. It will take all of us working together though," the letter stated.

The North Dakota State Association of City and County Health Officials also expressed its support for the measures in a letter Tuesday.

"As discussed throughout this pandemic, classic mitigation strategies to stay home when not feeling well, physical distancing, hand hygiene diligence, and wearing masks while physical distancing in public are individual pieces that work together in helping combat this infectious disease," the letter stated.

**Bars restricted, relief available**

Burgum also addressed questions raised about bars being allowed to remain open while certain school activities are paused.

"The bar and restaurant industry employs thousands of North Dakotans who rely on this income to provide for their families and support local schools and services, and the industry has been forced to modify operations throughout the pandemic" Burgum said. "These measures allow establishments to continue operating in a manner that keeps both staff and customers safe."

Some bars and restaurants in high-risk counties weren't adhering to the ND Smart Restart recommendations to limit occupancy to 25 percent and require face coverings, and Friday's actions replaced those recommendations with requirements.

Bars and restaurants are now required to limit occupancy to 50 percent of licensed seating capacity, not to exceed 150 people. Food and beverage can only be served to seated patrons; no stand-up service is allowed. Tables must allow at least 6 feet of physical distancing between individual parties. All staff must wear face coverings, and patrons must wear masks except when consuming food or beverages. In-person service is not allowed between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m.

Burgum noted that the North Dakota Department of Commerce will begin accepting applications for the Hospitality Economic Resiliency Grant (HERG) at 10 a.m. Friday, Nov. 20, through 5 p.m. Dec. 4. The state has made $54 million available for the program to provide relief to bars, restaurants, entertainment venues and certain other businesses affected by the pandemic.

For more information on North Dakota's COVID-19 response, visit www.health.nd.gov/coronavirus or www.ndresponse.gov.

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