With Cases Rising in Maine & Nationwide, Mills Administration Announces Measures to Prevent Spread of the Deadly COVID-19 Virus

November 1, 2020

Extends Keep Maine Healthy Program; Resets Indoor Gathering Limits; Postpones Reopening of Bars; Amends Travel Protocols

As the COVID-19 virus explodes across the country, Maine this week recorded a significant increase in cases, hospitalizations, and positivity rates. Friday saw 103 new cases of COVID-19, the highest single-day increase in Maine since the beginning of the pandemic. Saturday saw 98 new cases, and one more person lost their life to the virus. Maine's 7-day positivity rate, while still significantly lower than other states, doubled over the last two weeks to 0.92 percent.

> *"If we do not control this outbreak, we may never get this evil genie back in the bottle," exhorted Governor Janet Mills.*

This weekend, the nation surpassed more than nine million total cases of COVID-19, and more than 230,000 deaths—about four times the number of American soldiers who perished during the entire Vietnam war.

In response, this weekend New York adopted an aggressive quarantine and testing plan for visitors from most states. Rhode Island significantly reduced its gathering limits. Massachusetts added Connecticut and New Jersey to its quarantine requirements, and Connecticut urged stricter local enforcement of COVID-19 rules following incidents at bars. Other states are also taking aggressive actions in the face of rising case numbers.

Here in Maine, the Mills Administration announced today actions to prevent and mitigate the spread of the virus, taking into consideration the need to keep businesses open and the need to keep schools accessible to students. The Administration will extend the "Keep Maine Healthy" program through December to promote local prevention efforts. The Administration will also return to lower indoor gathering limits, postpone bar and tasting room reopenings for now, and remove New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut from exempt status under the State's travel advisory.

> *"Epidemiological data and case investigations during the past week show that Maine is experiencing widespread community transmission," said Dr. Nirav D. Shah, Director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "Maine people and visitors can help limit further spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 by adhering to proven safety measures. Every time you leave your home, please do so with the intent of making Maine safer for yourself and others."*

> *"Like most people in this state, I am extremely concerned about the spread of this virus as we head into colder winter months and the holiday season, when we customarily gather with friends and family," said Governor Mills. "Unfortunately, in this era, dinner parties and other traditional gatherings can play host to an uninvited guest: a deadly virus for which there is no treatment and no cure, a virus which is attacking babies, teenagers, Millennials and seniors alike in every region of Maine and all across the country. Each*

one of us must assume personal responsibility for our actions and do everything we can to get this virus under control."

"In order to keep people safe, in order to keep schools open as much as possible, in order to keep our economy rolling, it is more important than ever before that each of us avoids gatherings, stays six feet apart from other people, uses hand sanitizer, gets a flu shot, wears a face covering indoors and outdoors, and washes our hands frequently,"continued Governor Mills. "We can stem the tide of this virus, but it will require a team effort on the part of all Maine people. We are in this together. Maine people recognize that this is a fundamental matter of social and personal responsibility — like not driving on the wrong side of the road, like putting your young child in a car seat, like wearing a coat in cold weather."

Extending the Keeping Maine Healthy Grant Program

To support Maine communities as they promote compliance with public health and safety measures, the Mills Administration extended its financial support to Maine municipalities established by the Keep Maine Healthy Plan. The Administration previously allotted more than $13 million in federal CARES ACT funding to 132 municipalities and two Tribal governments to develop and implement their own COVID-19 prevention, education and protection plans.

These plans include printing and posting COVID-19 prevention information; developing local educational activities consistent with CDC guidelines; installing fences, tape, and signage for physical distancing in public spaces and closed streets; providing staff to limit crowds in front of restaurants and other public sites; purchasing and making available personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer at public locations; and supporting the purchase of extra cleaning supplies and added staff time for enhanced cleaning and management of public spaces and restroom facilities. Plans may also support staff time for a Code Enforcement Officer, Local Health Officer, or other designated person to serve as the local contact for educating local businesses on best practices, following up on public complaints, and reporting public health violations to State officials if those complains cannot quickly be resolved through local efforts. All eligible municipal expenses through December will be now reimbursed.

"Maine's cities, towns and Tribal governments are invaluable partners in our work to keep Maine healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic," said Jeanne Lambrew, Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services. "The extension of this program will bolster their creative efforts to educate residents, visitors and businesses about the importance of public health measures and ensure compliance with requirements."

Reducing Indoor Gathering Limits

While the Mills Administration's priority is to encourage voluntary compliance with public health and safety measures that mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the Administration is also taking measures to reduce large gatherings, a primary concern of public health experts. Effective Wednesday, November 4, indoor gatherings will return to a maximum of 50 people, regardless of capacity. The gathering limit on outdoor activities remains at 100 people under existing guidelines, with physical distancing and the use of face coverings. Occupancy limits for retail establishments will remain at 5 people per 1,000 square feet of shopping space. The Mills Administration had previously increased indoor seating limits to 50 percent of permitted capacity or 100 people, whichever was less.

Postponing the Reopening of Bars and Tasting Rooms

The Administration previously anticipated reopening bars and tasting rooms to indoor seated service on Monday, November 2, 2020. But in light of rising COVID-19 case numbers in Maine and scientific evidence that the unique environment of bars, including enclosed spaces where people gather with members outside their own household while talking loudly and not wearing face coverings, elevates the risk of COVID-19 transmission, the reopening of bars and tasting rooms for indoor seated service is postponed until further notice. The Administration will continue to evaluate public health metrics to determine when it is safe to reopen bars and tasting rooms for indoor seated service.

"To the business owners and employees of bars and tasting rooms, I am deeply sorry that we have been forced to make this decision to postpone your reopening to prevent the further spread of the virus. I know that you were ready and willing to follow public health guidance to keep yourselves and Maine people safe. We realize that this decision will cause hardship. We do not take this action lightly, but the rapid rise in cases in just the past six days means that we cannot in good conscience proceed with the planned reopening," said Governor Mills. "My Administration will continue to do all we can to support Maine's small businesses and hardworking families through these challenging times and will continue to seek further financial relief from Congress for Maine businesses who have lost so much already."

"This continues to be a challenging time for small businesses across the country," said Heather Johnson, Commissioner of the Department of Economic and Community Development. "We hope that the recent Maine Economic Recovery Grant Program has supported some of the businesses impacted, and we will continue to work to find creative ways to support businesses and their employees."

Adjusting States Exempt from Maine's Quarantine or Testing Alternative

The Administration also announced that, effective Wednesday, November 4, 2020, people traveling from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut are no longer exempt from Maine's quarantine or negative test requirement. People coming here from these states must either quarantine for 14 days or receive a negative COVID-19 test with a sample taken less than 72 hours from arrival in Maine, quarantining while awaiting test results. This protocol includes Maine residents returning from one of the non-exempt states.

The travel decision comes after the Administration reviewed recent public health data, including other states' rapidly rising prevalence of the virus and positivity rates. In reviewing these metrics, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey demonstrated an alarming increase in prevalence of the virus. New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts remain exempt from the 14-day quarantine or negative test requirement, although the Administration is closely evaluating public health metrics in Massachusetts and may reinstate the quarantine or negative test requirement if trends do not improve.

Even with these updated travel protocols, Governor Mills strongly recommends that visitors from exempt states and Maine people returning from exempt states, especially during the upcoming holiday season, obtain a test in order to "Know Before You Go." Under the Department of Health and Human Services Standing Order, any person in Maine who feels they need a test, with or without symptoms, can get a test without an order from a primary care provider.

The Mills Administration also recently announced it will distribute 400,000 rapid antigen tests, including 300,000 provided to up to 65 Walgreens pharmacy locations from Kittery to Madawaska. Testing will be available to the public at no charge as a drive-through service at a future date in November. People can find COVID-19 testing sites near them via the website https://get-tested-covid19.org/.

With the vast majority of Maine's economy reopened under Stage 4 of the Restarting Maine's Economy Plan, it is critical that Maine people take steps to protect themselves, their businesses, and others by wearing face coverings indoors and outdoors, keeping six feet apart, and washing hands often with soap and warm water. The Administration also encourages employers to allow employees to work remotely whenever practicable and encourages Maine people to patronize Maine businesses by ordering curbside and using delivery services.

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