

Louisiana governor relaxing virus-related restrictions

By: The Associated Press May 11, 2020 0

Saying Louisiana has made significant strides in combating the COVID-19 outbreak, Gov. John Bel Edwards announced Monday that he will begin loosening restrictions this weekend on churches, restaurants, salons and gyms, moving the state away from a “stay-at-home” position he enacted in late March.

The new regulations take effect Friday, largely in line with the first phase of reopening as envisioned under the White House guidelines provided to states. Businesses and churches newly allowed to open will be limited to one-quarter of their previous capacity, and employees working around customers will have to wear masks.

Restaurants and coffee shops can reopen inside seating and table service. Barbers and salons can resume colors and cuts. Museums, zoos, aquariums and movie theaters can resume operations. Gamblers can return to casinos and video poker sites. But none can exceed the 25% capacity level.

Tattoo parlors, spas, amusement parks and children’s museums will remain closed. Edwards cautioned that high-risk individuals should stay home as much as possible, and others should wear masks and stay distant from people who aren’t in their households.

Edwards said the latest restrictions will last until June 5.

The Democratic governor said he decided to lessen the constraints he enacted in late March because Louisiana, one of the nation’s early hot spots for the coronavirus, is seeing consistent declines in new virus cases and hospitalization rates for COVID-19 disease patients.

“The people of Louisiana have worked really hard since this public health emergency was first announced in order to slow the spread of COVID-19,” Edwards said.

Fears of overwhelming hospital capacity and running out of ventilators for the most fragile patients have subsided. And Edwards said the state is taking the needed steps to increase testing and the number of people who can track both those who have tested positive for the virus and the people they’ve been in contact with. Those people could then be isolated to slow the rate of infections.

Edwards’ current stay-at-home order is credited with lessening the scale of the virus outbreak. But as May began, Edwards has faced increasing pressure from Republican elected officials to start reopening more of the economy.

Louisiana’s economy has been decimated by business closures enacted to slow the disease’s spread. More than 310,000 people already have qualified for unemployment benefits, according to the state labor department. And state economists warn the economic damage from the virus and the oil price decline will exceed the financial hit resulting from Hurricane Katrina.

For most people, the highly contagious coronavirus causes symptoms such as high fever and a dry cough that resolve in several weeks. But some people, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, can suffer severe symptoms that can be fatal.

Nearly 32,000 people in Louisiana have tested positive for the virus, and 2,242 have died from the COVID-19 disease, according to the state health department.

Restaurants had been waiting for word if they could offer more than outside seating with no table service.

Kristin Alfandre, whose family has owned Mason’s Grill in Baton Rouge for nearly 22 years, said her family decided early on not to lay anyone off; they’ve dipped into retirement savings and used the federal government’s Paycheck Protection Program to retain staff.

They’ve continued doing takeout and delivery orders or more recently, outdoor dining, but business is still down.

In Shreveport, Jeremy Shows, general manager for Frank's Pizza Napoletana, has already diagrammed out how many tables can fit in the restaurant at 25% capacity: eight. Since they don't have anywhere to store the unused tables, they'll leave them in place but remove the chairs. The staff is already wearing masks, some donated by customers.

Shows' wife has an autoimmune disease and to protect her, he's been staying with his mother for nearly two months. He said he hasn't hugged his son, who's with his wife, since March 13.

"We're ready to be open and we're ready to serve our guests, and we're ready to get back to the normal ways of life," he said. But at the same time, he's concerned about the health of his staff and guests. "Let's ease this open and get it open and just be careful. I think it's going to make everybody a little bit more diligent."

To sign up for free CityBusiness Daily Updates, [click here](#).