

Edwards: Louisiana Will Stay in 'Phase 2' for Two More Weeks

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Gov. John Bel Edwards speaks Monday, May 11, 2020, in Baton Rouge, La. (Travis Spradling/The Advocate via AP, Pool)

BATON ROUGE – Louisiana will stay in “phase two” of the White House-approved restrictions meant to control the spread of COVID-19 for at least two additional weeks, Gov. John Bel Edwards said Wednesday.

Crowds will remain limited to 50 people, face coverings still will be required in public settings, and bars still will be closed to on-premise service. Most other businesses will be limited to half of their normal capacity.

The current order is scheduled to end Friday. Edwards said White House officials approve of his decision to maintain the restrictions.

Many business owners and Republican politicians have urged Edwards to loosen the restrictions, citing the economic damage. Many restaurants, for example, have trouble sustaining their business while limited to 50 percent capacity.

Business owners have filed lawsuits seeking to lift some or all of the restrictions. Bar owners in particular have said it is unfair their line of work is being singled out, especially if no COVID-19 cases have been traced to their establishments.

But state and federal public health officials say barrooms are hot spots for coronavirus transmission, which is why closing them is considered a best practice in states like Louisiana with high rates of COVID-19.

COVID-19 testing sites in Louisiana have been shut down this week due to Tropical Storm Marco and Hurricane Laura. It takes about two weeks before a change in public behavior is reflected in the COVID-19 statistics, so Louisiana officials haven't yet been able to measure the impact of reopening K-12 schools, colleges and universities.

"We're basically going to be blind for this week," Edwards said.

Counting students, staff and faculty, schools make up about 25 percent of the state's population, Edwards said. Though most schools are teaching at least partially online, a significant proportion of the state's population potentially have come in contact with each other for the first time since campuses were closed in March, he said.

Southwest Louisiana, which appears to be about to take a direct hit from Hurricane Laura, has the highest COVID-19 positivity rate in the state, Edwards said. Thousands of people from the region are evacuating and may not return for some time, which creates additional risk.

"The prudent thing is to go two more weeks and then do an analysis of where we are," he said.

Recent reports have indicated modest but steady improvement in the state's case counts, positivity rates and number of people hospitalized. But Louisiana as a whole over the past week has had more than 100 new cases per 100,000 residents, which puts the state in the "red" according to federal standards. About half of the state's parishes also are considered red, Edwards said.

Attorney General Jeff Landry, after initially supporting Edwards' actions, has said the governor has overstepped his authority, though four court rulings have upheld the restrictions.

At least 4,688 Louisiana residents with COVID-19 have died, state officials say. There were 914 COVID-19 patients in hospitals and 148 of them were on ventilators, according to the most recent report.

Almost 145,000 cases have been confirmed in Louisiana, and officials believe almost 128,000 of those people have recovered.

By David Jacobs of the Center Square

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