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Contacts: Office of the Governor: Alena Yarmosky, Alena.Yarmosky@governor.virginia.gov

Governor Northam Unveils Blueprint for Easing Public Health Restrictions

‘Forward Virginia’ blueprint informed by diverse health and business stakeholders, includes testing, tracing, and PPE priorities

RICHMOND—Governor Ralph Northam today presented the “Forward Virginia” blueprint, which will help guide the Commonwealth on when to safely begin easing public health restrictions. The blueprint includes a phased approach that is grounded in the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and has specific goals to contain the spread of the virus through increased testing, personal protective equipment and supplies, and medical capacity.

“We will move forward, but in a way that prioritizes public health and builds public confidence,” **said Governor Northam**. “Businesses know that customers will return only when they feel that it is safe to do so. Our blueprint for the path forward is data-driven and provides clear guidance, so Virginians will know what to expect and understand how we will decide to when to lift certain public health restrictions.”

Virginia is looking at a wide range of public health data. The Governor emphasized that key indicators will include a 14-day downward trend in confirmed cases as a percentage of overall tests and in reduced COVID-19 hospitalizations. While hospitalization rates have largely stabilized in the Commonwealth, confirmed cases continue to rise.

The Forward Virginia blueprint includes the following priorities:

TESTING AND TRACING

To ensure the continued safety of Virginians, the Commonwealth aims to test at least 10,000 individuals per day. Karen Remley, former Commissioner of Health and current co-chair of Virginia’s Testing Work Group, outlined a four stage approach to meet this goal prior to safe reopening. The expanded testing plan includes hiring contact tracers, who will support local health departments in identifying individuals who may be exposed to COVID-19 and helping them self-isolate.

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Personal protective equipment (PPE) is critical to ramping up testing, ensuring the safety of healthcare staff, and expanding the medical workforce. Virginia’s PPE pipeline is improving, and hospitals are successfully managing their supplies. The Governor cautioned that safely easing restrictions will require an ongoing stable PPE supply chain across all sectors of healthcare, and ensuring that the supply is regularly replenished.

Virginia has ordered 17.4 million N95 masks, 8.3 million surgical masks, 17.1 million gloves, 1.7 million gowns, and 1 million face shields. This includes a contract signed jointly with Maryland and the District of Columbia for 5 million N95 masks.

Governor Northam announced that a second shipment from Northfield Medical Manufacturing is scheduled to arrive today and will be promptly distributed. The latest shipment includes 3 million nitrile exam gloves, 100,000 N95 masks, 500,000 3-ply procedure masks, and 40,000 isolation gowns.

HOSPITAL CAPACITY AND STAFF

Hospitalizations and ICU admissions are largely stable across Virginia, even as case counts continue to rise. To ensure continued capacity as Virginia move towards “Phase One” of easing restrictions, Governor Northam yesterday extended the ban on elective surgeries through May 1 and expanded the ability of physicians’ assistants and nurse practitioners with two or more years of clinical experience to practice without a collaborative agreement.

The Virginia Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) continues to recruit and deploy medical and non-medical volunteers to bolster the work of local health departments, hospitals, and healthcare providers. The MRC currently has over 16,500 trained volunteers, more than halfway to Virginia’s goal of 30,000.

PHASE ONE OF EASING RESTRICTIONS

Governor Northam outlined key benchmarks Virginians can expect in the first phase, which will begin no sooner than two weeks from now to allow for a 14-day downward trend in confirmed COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.

Phase one includes continued social distancing, teleworking, limits on travel and public gatherings, and recommended use of face coverings. Any easing of restrictions will be informed by public health experts, members of the Governor’s COVID-19 Business Task Force, state and local officials, and other stakeholders.

The Commonwealth is developing two sets of guidance: one with broad based recommendations for all businesses, and another with industry specific recommendations for public-facing businesses like restaurants and non-essential retail. The guidance will be provided to businesses in early May.

The slides from today’s presentation are available here.

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