

Tennessee governor's delay in issuing stay-at-home order means thousands more will die, physicians warn

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Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee finally reacted to calls by state physicians and national and world health care officials, issuing a mandatory state-at-home order to fight the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the state.

Lee's anemic "safer at home" order went into effect at one minute before midnight, Tuesday, March 31, and will last until April 14. Nonessential businesses will remain closed, but state residents were told only to stay home "as much as possible."

Lee "maintained his continued resistance to adopting stronger social distancing measures taken by other states," Associated Press reported.

"This is not a mandated shelter in place order, but it is a strong urging for Tennesseans to stay at home," Lee said during his daily media briefing. "I personally believe that with personal liberty comes personal responsibility."

As of Monday, state health officials reported 1,834 cases in the state resulting in 148 hospitalizations and 13 deaths.

Lee, a Republican and Trump supporter, advocate of charter schools, and multimillion-dollar businessman is no doubt under intense pressure from groups like the Chamber of Commerce to provide workers for businesses, no matter the cost to the working class.

Reaction from the medical community was quick and negative, often almost unbelieving that after calls for shelter-in-place measures from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Tennessee Medical Association (TMA) and thousands of physicians, Lee would issue such a spineless and harmful order.

"Thousands of Tennessee doctors have been urging Gov. Lee to take shelter at home measures to help fight

the spread of COVID-19," News Channel 5 reported after Lee's Monday press conference announcing the order. "However, these same doctors are calling out the newest executive order, saying the measures are "not enough," even questioning "How many deaths will it take for Governor Lee to listen to health experts?"

"This order doesn't go far enough to save lives and keep Tennesseans in their homes," Dr. Aaron Milstone told News Channel 5. "Gov. Lee's weak leadership has created confusion, and that in turn is undermining the strong, early steps many of our cities' mayors took to protect families. Now some Tennesseans are separating from others, but many ARE NOT—and this means this virus keeps spreading. Urging separation is not enough" (emphasis in the original).

The station's reporting that the Tennessee Health Department suggested using swim goggles, plastic garbage bags, bandanas, diapers and even "layers of tissue and gauze" as substitutes for protective clothing prompted Lee to deny that there were any shortages.

"You know you hear about a lot of makeshift things happening, but there's not makeshift stuff happening in our state yet," Lee told the public.

The station responded: "In fact, News Channel 5 obtained pictures showing how health professionals in Tennessee are already using makeshift equipment to protect themselves in order to conserve the good supplies for an expected wave of coronavirus cases."

It added: "During Monday's press briefing, Lee's office refused to allow 'News Channel 5 Investigates' to ask questions—such as why it took him so long to follow the doctors' recommendations."

Lee still provided a convoluted statement for the gathered media.

“I have said that I have sought discernment to identify the right decision at the right time for the right place,” Lee said.

Milstone, a Franklin critical care physician, has been leading the campaign to pressure the governor.

According to Milstone, epidemiology models predict a statewide stay-at-home order could potentially save thousands of lives.

“The only tactic guaranteed to slow the spread of the virus and mitigate both the strain on our health care supplies and workers, while protecting lives, is the stay at home order Governor Lee should have enacted over a week ago,” Milstone said in a media statement.

“Yes, he does NOT go far enough.,” a retired Tennessee pulmonary/intensive care unit doctor told the WSWs. “[He] should have issued a real shelter-in-place order instead of this stuttering ‘let’s close this, then close that’ approach. Crowds are still gathering at churches and clustering in public places.

“A clear directive, with some enforcement—padlocking churches, for example—would be far more effective at ‘flattening the curve’ and would also demonstrate an understanding of the principles of leadership. It’s better to bite the bullet than to just keep nibbling at it over weeks. And yes, people in Tennessee will unnecessarily die because of his lack of direction.”

In times of disaster and stress many religious people turn to their beliefs for comfort. No one should be barred or discriminated against for holding religious beliefs and they must be protected.

However, there have been several reports of evangelical Christian churches holding religious services violating both government restrictions on the size of gatherings and the laws of science and medicine. These meetings should cease, with arrangements made for online services and other methods of keeping congregations connected. As with urging the population not to gather at sporting events and entertainment venues, religious gatherings should be discouraged and shut down, which should not require the use of padlocks.



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