

South Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee reopening as coronavirus deaths mount

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The Republican governors of three southeastern US states, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee, have put plans into motion that partially lift COVID-19 restrictions in their respective states, some of which have already taken place. These aggressive moves go beyond US President Donald Trump's vague guidelines for "Opening Up America Again," which all US states are now using to remove restrictions and "reopen" in the coming weeks.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp approved reopening "gyms, fitness centers, bowling alleys, body art studios, barbers, cosmetologists, hair designers, nail care artists, estheticians, their respective schools & massage therapists" beginning on Friday, April 24, with restrictions. He also stated that theaters, private social clubs and restaurants will be allowed to reopen on Monday, April 27.

South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster began removing economic restrictions April 19, allowing businesses previously deemed non-essential, such as department stores, flea markets, bookstores and music shops, to reopen. Last week, McMaster reopened public boat ramps that had been closed for several weeks and encouraged people to practice social distancing on the state's waterways. When asked why he was not adhering to Trump's guidelines that recommend 14 days of declining positive tests before lifting restrictions, McMaster stated that these were "good guidelines" but not requirements.

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee announced this week that some of his state's businesses will be allowed to reopen on Monday, April 27, and that the vast majority can follow suit on Friday, May 1. Alaska Governor Mike Dunleavy, a Republican, has also announced that he intends to remove restrictions this week, allowing businesses such as restaurants and hair salons to reopen.

According to Trump's guidelines, which are an expression of the interests of Wall Street and finance capital, "phase one" states should allow "large venues" such as restaurants, movie theaters, sporting venues and places of worship to operate under "strict" social-distancing protocols; elective surgeries would resume on an outpatient basis; and gyms would reopen if they adhere to "physical distancing and sanitation protocols." Schools, daycare centers and bars should remain closed in phase one, and visits to senior living facilities and hospitals should also continue to be prohibited.

The gating criteria for phase one include a downward trajectory of influenza-like illnesses reported within a 14-day period, a downward trajectory of documented cases reported within a

14-day period, and a "robust" testing program in place for at-risk health care workers. Even though these criteria are themselves inadequate for the health and safety of workers, none of the states in question actually meets them, or is even close, particularly on the question of testing.

Virtually all US states have told their residents, including health care workers, that they should get tested only if they exhibit strong symptoms of COVID-19. This means that the number of people infected with the novel coronavirus (which causes COVID-19) are much higher than what is actually reported.

An examination of the data reported in each of the three states shows an overall upward trajectory in the number of new cases reported each week, not downward.

During the last two weeks, Georgia has had six days with more than 700 new cases each. The state has performed 84,779 tests and confirmed 19,398 cases of COVID-19, placing it at number 12 among all US states. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Georgia has had 3,702 people hospitalized and 774 people die due to the illness.

Tennessee has seen a steady overall increase in new COVID-19 cases, with a consistent peak in data at the beginning of each week. There are about 300 new cases reported on each of the peak days and an increase of about 1,000 new cases overall each week.

South Carolina showed a lower number of new cases reported last week, but the state's Department of Health and Environmental Control reports that this is likely due to incomplete data collection. Only 766 new cases were reported for the week ending on April 18, while each of the previous two weeks saw over 1,200 new reported cases.

South Carolina's state epidemiologist, Linda Bell, stated that there has been a "potential leveling off" in the state's new cases, but that the decline is not yet consistent. "We all obviously want to see an economic recovery, but at the same time we have to give the message that the risk of exposure remains for everyone."

Dr. Jonathan Reiner, a cardiologist who was an adviser to the George W. Bush administration, told CNN that the crisis has not abated. "In Georgia, the virus is still very, very active and this behavior is frankly reckless." Reiner has previously stated that everyone should be tested for COVID-19, even if they do not show symptoms of the virus.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, warned against reopening too quickly. During an interview on Good Morning America, he stated: "If you

jump the gun and go into a situation where you have a big spike, you're going to set yourself back. As painful as it is to go by the careful guidelines of gradually phasing into a reopening, it's going to backfire. That's the problem."

The reopening is going ahead despite these warnings, with the governors assured that Trump will not make any effort to "enforce" the White House guidelines, whose real purpose was to give the administration political cover in the near-certain event that the first states to reopen will suffer appalling casualties.

This is a virtual death sentence for many of the residents of these states, who are being used as guinea pigs in the ruling elite's bid to begin making profits again. Georgia Governor Kemp admitted, "I will say that, when we have more people moving around we probably will see our cases continue to go up, but we're a lot better prepared for that than we were a month ago."

People in all three states have responded with vehemence to these developments.

In a Facebook group created to follow developments in South Carolina, one member said, "We are the experiment! Georgia is opening bowling alleys and movie theaters. No words!" Another wrote, "I disagree with opening these places. I'm a massage therapist, and yes, I need money, but not at the cost of losing my life or putting anyone else in jeopardy. We are headed for disaster."

A Twitter user declared: "I live in Tennessee and this scares the hell out of me. Seven days ago, the Republican governor extended the stay at home and promised more testing. Only 11k were tested this weekend, and now he's reopening the state."

Another wrote, "Brian Kemp is not reopening Georgia economy [sic]. He is kicking uninsured, vulnerable workers off unemployment. If businesses reopen, workers have to go back—whether or not it is safe. Owners have to reopen because they can't file for aid if Kemp says it is safe. It is cruelty."

Since March 14, Georgia has received 853,618 unemployment claims, 16.6 percent of the state's labor force. Tennessee has 317,535 new claims, which represent 9.4 percent of its labor force, and South Carolina received 272,560 new claims from 11.4 percent of its workforce.

In addition to outrage being expressed by state residents, many of the businesses in question have reported that meeting these deadlines for reopening may be impossible. Many of the largest movie theater chains, for instance, such as AMC, Regal and Cinemark, have already furloughed or laid off almost all of their employees across the United States.

Local officials are also refusing to comply with state directives. Mayor Kelly Girtz of Athens-Clarke County, Georgia stated Tuesday, "I'm exhorting everybody in this community to shelter in place. Do not reopen at this point. It's not time to do it."

Officials in Charleston County, South Carolina said that they will not totally reopen their beaches and issued a joint statement: "There is no evidence from medical professionals that indicates that the threat of COVID-19 in our region has diminished. South Carolina is still in the acceleration phase and even with the reduction in growth of new cases, new cases could begin to grow quickly if social distancing restrictions are lifted."

In addition to the reopening of businesses and waterways in

South Carolina, the City of Jacksonville in Florida reopened some of its beaches last week. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, another Republican, echoed his southern counterparts when he told Fox News that "Florida has flattened the curve. People have done a great job, and I think we understand that you can do both. You can continue to fight COVID-19 but also get people back to work and have society function again."

Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick has also called for the reopening of his state, blatantly stating on Fox News on Monday, "There are more important things than living, and that's saving this country for my children and grandchildren and saving this country for all of us." Patrick had previously suggested that grandparents should be willing to risk death in the interests of reopening business operations more generally.

While Trump-style Republicans are taking the lead, all of the states, including those run by Democrats, are using Trump's vague guidelines to reopen their states in the coming weeks.

Colorado Governor Jared Polis has extended his state's stay-at-home order only to April 26 and stated that while not all restrictions will be lifted at once, "We have to find a sustainable way that will be adapted in real time to how we live with it." Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker stated Monday that he will slowly start lifting shelter-in-place orders so that "some" industry workers can go back to work. Polis is a multi-millionaire and Pritzker a billionaire.

Kansas Governor Laura Kelly has stated that she expects the coronavirus cases to peak between April 19 and 29, and has extended her state's stay-at-home order only through May 3.

Some Democratic Party governors and local officials claim that they will lift restrictions based on the use of scientific evidence, but they are already responding to the concocted media narrative, based on tiny right-wing demonstrations in various state capitals, that there is an overwhelming popular demand to "go back to work."

In reality, this demand is coming from the corporate bosses and the banks, not the workers, and it is driven by the necessity to resume the extraction of surplus value that is the motor force of the capitalist system.



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