

Washington DC, Virginia and Maryland announce plans for reopening region

Dmitri Church
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Last Friday, the leaders of the US National Capital region—Washington DC Mayor Muriel Bowser (Democrat), Maryland Governor Larry Hogan (Republican), and Virginia Governor Ralph Northam (Democrat)—announced plans for loosening restrictions put in place to combat the ongoing pandemic.

As was the case four weeks prior, when the three regional leaders announced stay-at-home orders in their respective jurisdictions, their announcements were timed to coincide with one another, while the content of their plans were similar. Instead of offering a specific timetable for reopening, they put forward the requirement of a two-week decline in new cases and hospital usage. Following this, limitations would be relaxed in stages.

Hogan's plan involves first lifting the stay-at-home order and the opening of some nonessential businesses, followed by allowing indoor gyms and childcare to reopen, as well as elective hospital procedures, and finally allowing large social gatherings. The other two leaders offered similar road maps. All three remarked that they want to reopen as soon as possible, floating late May as a possibility.

As of Wednesday morning, there were 38,490 confirmed cases in the three jurisdictions combined, with 1,712 dead. That is an increase of 1,532 cases and 148 deaths over Monday morning. In contrast, at the beginning of April, there were 3,405 known cases in the region with only 62 deaths.

Maryland accounted for 20,128 cases and 1,023 dead of that total, with Virginia at 14,364 cases and 498 dead, and DC at 3,998 cases and 191 dead. Maryland released state figures on nursing home-related infections on Tuesday, revealing that 471 of the state's deaths occurred in such locations.

With the number of new cases rising daily, the

disease has not yet started to peak in the region. Webster Ye, director of government relations for the Maryland Health Department, told the *Daily Record* at the end of March that he expected the virus to peak “probably around the 4th of July.” Similarly, “public health folks at (Johns) Hopkins and University of Maryland are predicting this will last for months not weeks and that we will likely be closer to exhausting the [state's] hospital capacity.”

Meanwhile, employment in the region continues to fall, with 46,676 people in Maryland, 84,387 in Virginia, and 8,591 in DC filing new unemployment claims just in the past week, bringing the total number of new claims over the past five weeks close to 1 million. This is no doubt an underestimate of actual joblessness as mechanisms for claiming online have been overwhelmed by the surge in use.

Another key point of the announcements last week was the creation of new task forces and advisory groups to guide the process of reopening. The Reopen D.C. Advisory Group announced by Bowser will be chaired by Michael Chertoff, Homeland Security Secretary under President George W. Bush and co-author of the USA PATRIOT Act, and Susan Rice, National Security Adviser and then ambassador to the UN under Obama and one of the architects of the US assaults on Libya and Syria. Hogan added new members to his advisory group including Arne Sorensen, the president of Bethesda-based Marriott International; Robert Doar, president of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank; Kevin Plank, the founder of athletic clothing company Under Armour; Mark McManus, general president of the United Association, a plumber and pipefitters union; and Augie Chiasera, president of M&T Banks Greater Baltimore and Chesapeake Region.

Similarly, Northam created a task force consisting of two dozen Virginia business leaders, ranging from Amazon, Walmart, and Volvo representatives to local brewery and restaurant owners. Speaking of his appointees, Northam declared: “These are Virginians who are thinking every day about how to protect the health of their staff and the communities in which they operate. They understand that our public health and business interests are aligned.”

Under conditions where Amazon is forcing workers to work shoulder to shoulder with no protective equipment and Volvo is desperately trying to reopen their plants, such claims are farcical. The immediate concern of all those on the task force is to restart production and resume the accumulation of profit, even if it comes at the expense of workers’ lives.

While news media comments have praised the response of the Washington DC region’s leadership, and Hogan in particular, to the COVID-19 pandemic, these appointments expose their true priorities. While making a show of being more deliberate and scientifically grounded than their counterparts in neighboring states and especially the White House, it is clear they are preparing the ground for a rapid return to work without adequate safety measures. Through their appointments, they have shown they are just as willing to overrule the advice of public health officials and doctors in favor of the needs of private profit.

The pandemic has pushed Hogan in particular back into the national spotlight. There had been speculation last year that he might pose a primary challenge to Donald Trump in the 2020 election, although Hogan has denied any such plans. Now his position as head of the National Governors Association is guaranteeing him frequent interviews on national television, and pundits are touting him as a “good” Republican and public servant in contrast to the current resident of the White House.

Hogan’s press conferences are run amicably, and his presentation is matter of fact, unlike the boasting, recrimination, and outright buffoonery displayed by Trump on a daily basis. However, Hogan has shown repeatedly that he harbors no substantial political differences with Trump, or his counterparts in the Governors Association who are openly agitating for a return to work. Hogan has overseen the close collaboration between Maryland and ICE to use

driver’s license information to track down undocumented immigrants. He offered billion-dollar tax breaks to Amazon to entice them to place their second headquarters in Maryland. Now he is turning over his administration’s response to the pandemic to the whims of big businesses.

In a related development, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) has announced it would be closing significant portions of the Metro system from Memorial Day in late May until Labor Day this coming September to expedite track repairs. They justified the decision on the basis that ridership has been reduced by over 95 percent due to the pandemic. However, the time span of the Metro shutdown is far longer than any officials have been willing to suggest the stay-at-home orders will continue.

If businesses reopened under conditions where a large chunk of the Metro is still closed, it would mean large numbers of workers forced to take crowded buses or quit their jobs, cutting off their access to unemployment benefits.



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