

US state governments of Virginia and Maryland plan to reopen businesses

Ray Coleman, Nick Barrickman
9 May 2020

In the last week, the governments of Washington, DC, Maryland and Virginia have set official dates to begin the reopening of businesses. Even though public health agencies in all three jurisdictions lack adequate testing capabilities and contact tracing methods, lawmakers have made it clear they intend to reopen closed businesses and public spaces later in May.

As of Friday, the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia had 56,598 cases and 2,557 deaths. Maryland, which on Thursday began opening golf courses, beaches and other outdoor leisure spaces, has the region's worst infection and death rate, with 29,374 cases and 1,503 deaths. Virginia has 21,570 cases and 769 deaths, and DC has 5,654 cases and 285 deaths. This compares to 45,032 cumulative cases in the capital region as recently as May 1, according to Johns Hopkins University.

On Friday alone there were 119 new deaths reported in the region. In the District of Columbia, of the 19 new deaths, 13 of the victims were residents in the city's Fifth, Seventh and Eighth Wards, the poorest neighborhoods in the city. The same region saw over 781,000 people file for unemployment benefits in the seven-week period ending May 2.

On Monday, the Democratic governor of Virginia Ralph Northam set the tone for the other jurisdictions, announcing that the commonwealth would begin "stage one" of the reopening process on Friday, May 15. "Everything you have done has truly made a difference," Northam declared. "We flattened the curve... and our hospitals have not been overwhelmed."

Virginia will allow restaurants and hair salons to reopen with some capacity restrictions and requirements for the wearing of face coverings. Non-essential retail outlets and bars can open with 50 percent of their former capacity. Large entertainment

venues, indoor gyms and theaters will stay closed at first.

According to Northam, this first stage of reopening will likely take three weeks. After that point, the state would "consider moving to another degree of slightly more permissive conditions" on businesses, wrote the *Washington Post*. Last Friday, the state authorized dental, animal veterinarian and doctors' offices to begin performing elective procedures. The state will allow especially hard hit areas such as the Washington, DC suburbs and the eastern shore to reopen at a slower pace.

On Wednesday, Maryland's Republican governor Lawrence Hogan performed an about-face from previous public announcements, citing "encouraging numbers," mainly a flat rate of recent hospitalizations, as an excuse to immediately begin the reopening process. "I know how anxious people are to get outside, both for their physical and mental well-being," said the governor. The reopening process is expected to begin kicking into full gear next week, as small businesses begin seeing relaxed restrictions.

The announcement came days after Hogan expressed reservations about the bipartisan drive to reopen states. Speaking on CNN's "State of the Union" program on Sunday, Hogan cited the recent crowds that gathered in Washington, DC to observe the United States Navy's Blue Angels flight demonstration as evidence of the dangers posed by reopening.

"You see this happening around the country as states try to open in a safe way," he said. "Unfortunately, the pressure is to do it in a not-safe way, and that's something that we're very concerned about and one of the reasons we're being cautious and trying to do things in a slow, safe and effective manner."

The announcement to reopen came after Hogan was

repeatedly singled out by small right-wing demonstrations demanding an immediate reopening of the state's economy. On Wednesday, Maryland's lone Republican congressional representative, Andy Harris, let loose a torrent of fascistic drivel during a House Appropriations subcommittee hearing. When a hearing witness said that reopening areas without adequate contact tracing in place would be unsafe, Harris declared: "We're safer if we're not born... The bottom line is there's some element of risk."

Harris has pushed for the immediate reopening of businesses, even as his own district on Maryland's eastern shore, which houses numerous meatpacking facilities, has seen one of the state's highest COVID-19 outbreaks.

In Washington, DC, Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser has yet to announce whether she will extend the district's shelter in place order, which also expires next Friday. Yesterday, the city's Health Department Director LaQuandra Nesbitt told *NBC News* that a "level of widespread community transmission," in which local infections could not be traced to a source, was still ongoing.

With the District's order for non-essential businesses to stay closed effective through May 15, Bowser said she will make an official decision on whether or not to extend the shutdown closer to that date. Nevertheless, she indicated exceptions could be made for certain businesses that can follow social distancing requirements for customers.

While citing a supposed decline in known COVID-19 hospitalizations as their main metric for evaluating business reopenings, the various governments have failed to deliver an adequate number of tests and systemic contact tracing. Virginia is preparing to send workers back onto the job without the faintest idea of who has been exposed to the coronavirus, who could be carrying it, and the people with whom they have had contact. While the state has doubled its testing to about 5,200 per day, it is well below its stated goal of achieving 10,000 tests daily.

Maryland Governor Hogan has often been held up as an example of stable leadership during the pandemic. Hogan was widely lauded in the capitalist press for obtaining 500,000 coronavirus test kits from South Korea last month, but the state has revealed it is hoarding the tests rather than using them.

Instead of immediately testing tens of thousands of essential workers and people who have had contact with people confirmed to have the coronavirus, Hogan ordered the Maryland National Guard to post sentries to watch over the test kits at an undisclosed location. It had been reported that the testing kits lacked vital chemical reagents, making them nearly useless for mass testing.

Despite the praise he has received as a sort of stoic foil compared to the outburst-prone President Donald Trump, Hogan has shown he is no more scientifically oriented in his administration's response to the pandemic than any other member of the capitalist establishment.

Both state governments have cited a flattening number of hospitalizations to proclaim the coast clear for reopening. A recent report in the *Washington Post* titled "More people in District dying outside of hospitals during pandemic" notes a 74 percent increase in individuals pronounced dead at the scene over the same period in 2019. "The number of people in the District dying outside hospitals spiked as the novel coronavirus started its sweep through the nation's capital, raising concerns that people suffering a wide range of critical ailments are not seeking medical attention," the article states.

"Some of those people contracted the virus; the city has so far confirmed such deaths at home for three residents. But officials suspect many of the deaths are not related to the virus and may be the result of heart attacks, drug overdoses or other causes."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact