

Maryland and Virginia begin “phase one” reopenings despite record increase in COVID-19 cases

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States in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States began lifting restrictions on businesses and public gatherings Friday amid record increases of the COVID-19 illness in the state of Virginia. Both Maryland and Virginia have recorded more than 30,000 cases each as of Sunday. Virginia has reported 1,009 deaths and Maryland is likely to surpass 2,000 by Monday.

Both states are abandoning the already-inadequate preconditions for reopening set out by the White House last month, which included a decline of daily infection rates throughout the course of two weeks. Neither state has met even this criterion, let alone provided an adequate number of tests, contact tracing and other necessities.

In contrast, the government of Washington, D.C.’s Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser announced last week plans to continue sheltering in place until June 8. The city has counted over 7,000 positive cases as of Sunday. However, Bowser has also hinted at the possible easing of restrictions for “nonessential” businesses prior to that date.

On Thursday, Virginia reported a record number of COVID-19 infections in the 24 hours prior to its reopening. The state counted 1,067 cases of the disease the day before. A seven-day average of the state’s infection rate reported by the *Washington Post* on Friday shows that Virginia saw 790 cases daily, with 485 of those infections concentrated in the heavily-populated suburbs of Washington, D.C. The state has seen an average of 25 deaths a day.

The Virginia government has failed to meet its stated daily goal of administering 10,000 tests to residents. The overall daily average has been around 6,000

throughout the past week. Further undermining the state’s testing data was the Virginia Department of Health’s announcement that nearly 10 percent of its findings came from serology tests, which are meant to determine the presence of antibodies in individuals previously infected.

Virginia’s Democratic Governor Ralph Northam has increasingly shed his earlier posture of being driven by a concern for the health of the population. His initial statements, in which he advocated a “science-based” approach to dealing with the sickness and reluctantly implemented mild social distancing measures, had been seized on by the Trump administration to attack the state government as hampering efforts to reopen the economy.

“Today is a big step for us, moving into phase one,” Northam declared at a press conference Friday. “The last thing that we need as a health issue, the last thing we need as an economic issue is to have to go back to where we’ve been. So let’s work together and not let that happen,” he added, referring to the social distancing measures he previously had advocated.

While areas especially hard hit by the pandemic will be allowed to remain closed, Northam is allowing retail businesses and restaurants to open at 50 percent capacity in regions less affected. Places of worship will also be allowed to open at half capacity.

Indicating that his administration had come under tremendous pressure from the tourist industry, Northam told the press, “I’m prepared to make an announcement—probably on Monday—regarding our beaches.” With Memorial Day a week away, retailers and hotels in the Virginia Beach and Eastern Shore have demanded they be included in the state’s

reopening plans.

“We’re in a really bad situation,” said hotel developer Bruce Thompson to the *Post* last week. “I don’t question the need for social distancing or sanitizing. It’s going to be 80 degrees this weekend. People are gonna go to the beach. ... So why not let us regulate it and control it?” said Thompson, a major political donor in the state and a member of Northam’s task force for reopening its economy.

The state of Maryland also began lifting restrictions Friday evening. According to the region’s CBS affiliate, “daily cases of COVID-19 reported in Maryland have been flat for more than a week. They aren’t getting worse, but they aren’t getting better.” The state has averaged 990 new cases on a daily basis for the past week.

“Maryland was a little bit lucky that we weren’t Washington [state] or New York, that we had several weeks to plan,” Dr. Gabe Kelen, the director of Johns Hopkins’ Department of Emergency Medicine, told the *Post*. According to the publication, Kelen insisted that despite certain positive data, “the disease has not peaked.”

“We’re predicting a new spike. At first, it might be a little baby spike, three to six weeks after everything opens up. There could be a huge spike in early to late summer, depending on how much responsibility individuals choose to take and how rationally this region opens up.”

As in Virginia, Maryland’s Governor Larry Hogan, a Republican, has set similar conditions for businesses reopening at 50 percent capacity. However, Maryland has not allowed restaurants to begin offering in-house dining. The state allowed popular beach destinations such as Ocean City to reopen to tourists earlier this month.

On Friday, several Maryland state lawmakers sent a letter to the governor’s office protesting the plans to reopen. “Without a robust testing, tracing, and isolation system in place, there is little doubt that any easing of restrictions will lead to additional COVID-19 cases,” said the letter, which was signed by a number of Democratic party lawmakers in the state’s more populated areas. As in Virginia, the majority of those cases have been concentrated in the Washington, D.C., suburbs north and east of the nation’s capital.

There is a farcical element in the states’ decision to

“stagger” the reopenings in the region. As with other states that have begun reopening, the resumption of business will immediately attract out-of-area customers, leading to a further spread of the virus. The effort to reopen prematurely has the intended political consequence of encouraging other regions to begin a hasty resumption of business.

According to the *Post*, state governments have reported a “staggering” loss of tax revenue compared to the same period last year. Virginia has reported a 26 percent drop in its tax receipts from April 2019, while Maryland has forecast the loss of roughly \$925 million in revenue by June. The precipitous drop off of taxes, combined with the explosion of unemployment, is set to lead to a massive budget crisis in the coming years.



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