

Democratic Governor Whitmer lifts major COVID-19 restrictions in Michigan

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Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, rescinded her stay-at-home order on Monday, permitting outdoor gatherings of 100 or fewer people effective immediately and moving the state into phase four of a six-part return-to-work plan, even as the pandemic continues to rage throughout the United States.

The governor ordered the major deescalation of COVID-19 restrictions while the number of confirmed cases and deaths from the novel coronavirus continues to grow throughout the state at a slowing rate of increase.

According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHSS), there are 57,731 cases and 5,553 deaths from the coronavirus in the state. As of Tuesday evening, Michigan has the sixth most deaths of any state in the country and is ranked number four in deaths per 100,000 population with 56, behind New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts.

The rushed nature of the announcement is evident by the fact that, according to MDHSS, only two of the state's eight regions, the Upper Peninsula and the Traverse City region, officially qualify for entering the fourth phase of the governor's back-to-work plan. All six of the other state regions are still in the plan's "flattening" phase.

The governor's new executive order no longer requires residents to stay at home regardless of the activity or reason for leaving. Other immediate changes are allowing indoor gatherings of 10 or more individuals who do not live together, opening of outdoor parks and recreation facilities where social distancing can be observed, resumption of house cleaning services and reopening of drive-in theaters.

The order permits retail stores to reopen on June 4 and bars and restaurants to reopen for indoor service on

June 8 with some capacity limits. Swimming pools and day camps for children will also resume on June 8, along with outdoor fitness, training and athletic practices as long as social distancing measures are observed.

In her statement on Monday, Whitmer said that the "data has shown that we are ready to carefully move our state into the next phase of the MI Safe Start Plan" and that "our goal is to announce a shift to phase five for the entire state prior to the fourth of July."

Clearly, the further reopening of economic activity in the state by the July 4 holiday is a business-driven objective with the travel and tourism industry generating approximately \$25 billion in income and employing 200,000 people in the state, most of it during the busy summer months.

The announcement of the changes to the restart of the Michigan economy comes four weeks after the governor permitted operations in the automotive manufacturing facilities to resume on May 7. Amid the promotional optimism about "the huge strides this state has made to slow the spread of this deadly virus," not one word was spoken about the rising numbers of new confirmed cases in auto factories across North America.

Whitmer's announcement was welcomed by both Democrats and Republicans in Michigan. Democrat Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan praised Whitmer "for her diligence and commitment to reopening the state safely. We look forward to reopening Detroit safely and efficiently." Republican State Senator Tom Barrett of Charlotte, a leading outspoken critic of Whitmer's pandemic restrictions, called the news of the partial statewide reopening "overdue but certainly welcome."

For more than a month, Michigan was the flash point of the right-wing back-to-work campaign engineered by the White House and the Republican Party leadership

that included multiple demonstrations at the Capitol building in Lansing. The demonstrations were combined with a series of lawsuits sponsored by the state Republican Party leadership, as well as a threat from the US Justice Department and Attorney General William Barr to declare the governor's executive orders an attack on civil liberties.

On April 30, extreme right-wing and fascistic protesters entered the legislative building and others stood outside the governor's office with assault rifles to demand the March 24 stay-home stay-safe executive order be lifted.

The right-wing campaign targeted Michigan due to the concentration of industrial manufacturing and the demands of the Big Three auto corporations in particular to force workers back onto the production and assembly lines regardless of the threat to their health and that of their families.

That the White House was working to mobilize its right-wing base to force the reopening of the state is further proven by the fact that the state's two US attorneys publicly commented on Whitmer's announcement on Monday. The statement by Michigan-based US attorneys Matthew Schneider and Andrew Birge, as well as US Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Eric Dreiband, said that Whitmer's announcement followed "action by the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division."

Furthermore, the attorneys' statement said that the stage four reopening provisions "better respects the constitutional liberties of Michiganders" and threatened, "The Department of Justice will continue to prioritize Attorney General Barr's memorandum regarding balancing public safety with the preservation of civil rights and to monitor the legality of the process of reopening in Michigan."



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