

Michigan governor announces emergency measures as COVID-19 surges throughout the state

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Responding to the massive surge of the pandemic across the state over the past week, Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced a series of new coronavirus restrictions on Sunday evening that are scheduled to take effect on Wednesday.

Among the new rules are the suspension of in-person classes at high schools and colleges and eat-in dining at restaurants and bars, the cancellation of all organized sports, and the shutdown of nontribal casinos, movie theaters and group exercise classes.

The temporary restrictions are being put in place by Whitmer for three weeks under the authority of the Michigan Public Health Code and are not the same as the executive declarations that had been issued previously such as the stay-at-home orders of last spring. Businesses are asked to allow office workers to work from home if possible.

The governor's announcement came after the number of confirmed cases in Michigan increased by 44,019 and 416 people died from COVID-19 in the past seven days. The number of coronavirus cases is now four times greater per day than it was at the height of the pandemic in April. The number of hospitalizations has also spiked, threatening to overrun the capacity of the health care systems across the state.

In her 6:00 p.m. statement, Governor Whitmer said, "Right now, there are thousands of cases a day and hundreds of deaths a week in Michigan, and the number is growing. If we don't act now, thousands more will die, and our hospitals will continue to be overwhelmed." She said that there is a very real danger that as many as one thousand people could die per day in the near future if action were not taken "right now to

slow the spread of this deadly virus."

The public health order restricts gatherings inside homes to two households at a time and health officials are strongly urging families to select a single other household to interact with over the next three weeks. The governor specifically mentioned the approaching holiday season and concerns about people gathering in homes during the cold winter months.

Governor Whitmer was accompanied at the Sunday press briefing by Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, chief medical executive and chief deputy for health at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), who said, "If we do not act now, we risk thousands more deaths, and even more people having long-term health consequences. The actions we are taking today are the best opportunity we have to get this virus under control."

Also speaking was Robert Gordon, director of the MDHHS, who added, "Indoor gatherings are the greatest source of spread, and sharply limiting them is our focus. The order is targeted and temporary, but a terrible loss of life will be forever unless we act. By coming together today, we can save thousands of lives."

Among the functions being allowed to continue are outdoor gatherings, outdoor and take-out dining. Parks will remain open and professional and college sports can proceed without spectators. Retail shopping, public transit, personal care such as haircuts by appointment and individual exercise at gyms are being permitted.

Significantly, manufacturing operations will remain open along with construction and health care workplaces. Childcare centers and elementary and middle schools are permitted to continue face-to-face

education as long as they continue to require mask-wearing and follow other health guidelines. This is clearly to ensure that working-class parents will continue to report to work.

The announcement by Governor Whitmer on Sunday comes approximately six weeks following the Michigan Supreme Court ruling that struck down as unconstitutional the Emergency Powers of Governor Act of 1945 under which she had made her executive declarations earlier in the year. The reduction in executive authority meant that the Republican-controlled state legislature was able to vote down an extension of the governor's state of emergency from April enabled by the Emergency Management Act of 1976.

While the Democrats have sought to assign blame for the present resurgence of the pandemic on the lifting of the emergency measures by the Republicans, the fact is that the exponential increase in COVID-19 cases has been building since workers were forced to return to the factories in mid-May. The governor also lifted the stay-at-home order on June 1, Detroit's three casinos were permitted to reopen on August 5, and movie theaters, bowling alleys and other gathering places were permitted to reopen with some restrictions just five weeks ago.

The original shutdown of the factories that began in March was the result of the independent action of autoworkers and bus drivers who walked off the job and refused to work under the unsafe and deadly conditions of the pandemic.



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