

North Central MASSACHUSETTS

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

May 11, 2020

Their Excellency Karyn Polito
Lieutenant Governor
Commonwealth of Massachusetts
State House, Room 280
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Michael Kennealy
Secretary of Housing and Economic
Development
Commonwealth of Massachusetts
1 Ashburton Place
Boston, MA 02108

RE: Phased Reopening Recommendations

Dear Lt. Gov. Polito and Sec. Kennealy,

Two months ago, the Governor took the historic action of ordering all nonessential businesses closed in an effort to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. This was an unprecedented step, and we applaud the Governor, his cabinet, and state officials across the Commonwealth for acting in a swift and decisive manner. These decisions have proven critical to flattening the curve and likely preserving the lives of thousands of residents. Despite being hard hit, Massachusetts has garnered praise for adeptly weathering this storm, which brings us to the purpose of today's letter.

With the daily growth in cases beginning to crest, the state has set out to chart a course towards reopening. As you are both aware, the precautions taken to stem the spread of this pandemic have incurred a significant economic cost for business owners and employees alike. For that reason, we are developing a regional economic recovery strategy to revitalize small businesses and restore our local economy. As you and your colleagues work to develop a plan to reopen the Commonwealth, we hope you will take into consideration some of the requests we have heard from local employers- summarized here:

Clarity and Coordination

As with any policy, a clear and consistent approach will be vital to success. Wherever practical, we hope the state will implement guidelines uniformly across Massachusetts. When this is not possible, we ask that decisions be made on a county or regional level to avoid a convoluted patchwork of regulations that vary from one municipality to another. This should be coupled with a clear timeline, including specific milestones, articulating the pace and order with which businesses can reopen. Doing so will eliminate opportunities for confusion and allow employers, employees, and patrons to proceed confidently towards a resumption of normality.

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Interstate Coordination

Relative to our first recommendation, we applaud Governor Baker's decision to align his efforts with those of several other states to our south. This is a sensible approach that will greatly benefit a range of stakeholders- including commuters, shipping and logistics companies, and interstate employers to name a few. It also ensures that businesses to the state's south and west will be unable to gain a competitive advantage in comparison to their Massachusetts counterparts. As a region neighboring New Hampshire, we ask that you and your colleagues take the actions of our northern neighbors into consideration as well.

Testing and Resource Equity

The potential for a resurgence in this virus' spread is real and cannot be ignored. Making a concerted, visible effort to guard against it will be essential to restoring a public sense of health and safety. To that end, a broad testing and contact tracing strategy will be essential. We therefore hope that these resources will be distributed equitably across the Commonwealth, guarding the safety of rural and urban communities alike while enabling public officials to identify new cases and quickly address them.

Likewise, provisions should be made to assist businesses in acquiring any personal protective equipment which state officials deem necessary. Masks represent a unique exception to this rule as they can be fashioned from a variety of products readily found in any home. The same cannot be said of hand sanitizer, latex gloves, or other items and chemicals regularly used to guard against viral contagion.

Childcare:

Amongst the most difficult and impactful issues to address in the midst of this will be that of childcare. While day care centers and elementary schools pose a significant risk to containment, the children these institutions serve are obviously too young to care for themselves. For that reason, their continued closure could significantly impede a return to work for many employees and small business owners. We recommend prioritizing a clear timeline for reopening these facilities, developing strong guidance for operators, and clearly articulating any precautions they will need to take as they reopen. This guidance should include novel solutions which balance the need to protect children and caregivers while allowing parents to gradually return to work. These could include prioritizing enrolment for essential workers or those who cannot work remotely, incentivizing businesses to provide on-sight childcare, and subsidizing at-home solutions for those who can afford them.

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Health Care Institutions:

The state's hospitals and healthcare facilities, and those who staff them, have performed admirably throughout this crisis. The professionalism of these institutions, coupled with the Governor's leadership and the cooperation of residents, ensured that the Commonwealth's medical system was never overwhelmed. Again, however, this was not achieved without expense. Many patients saw previously scheduled procedures delayed indefinitely as hospitals shifted resources to confront the pandemic. We are concerned about the tremendous impact this has had on patients and the institutions which serve them. These facilities are integral to the wellbeing of our communities and represent the second largest employer by sector in North Central Massachusetts. Once the situation has stabilized, we encourage the state to work with our hospitals and healthcare facilities, allowing them to safely resume nonemergency services unrelated to COVID-19. We further request that the Commonwealth assist these institutions as they recover and provide the support they need to prepare for a possible resurgence in the future.

Retail Outlets and Remote Orders:

Last week, the Governor relaxed restrictions on the state's flower shops, bookstores, and jewelers, enabling them to fulfill mobile orders ahead of Mothers' Day. Again, we applaud this decision as positive and measured, balancing the needs of business owners with the safety of their employees and customers. We ask that you extend this relief to all retail businesses capable of serving their clientele remotely. We further request that you continue relaxing these regulations- as conditions allow- gradually allowing a return to normalcy for this critical sector of the economy.

Liability

Some businesses have expressed concerns over the potential legal risks associated with novel coronavirus. These include the risk of being found liable should a customer or employee come into contact with the virus, and the privacy issues which could arise as employers work to monitor exposure amongst their workforce. We encourage the state to assist small businesses by providing solutions to these legal complexities, including additional guidance and legal protections.

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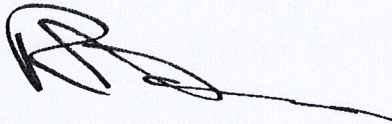
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Parks and Outdoor Attractions:

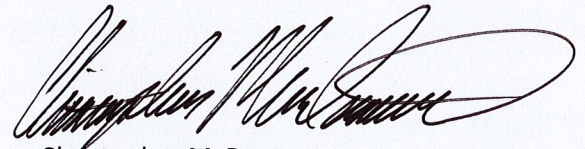
Lastly, we ask that guidance be published allowing state parks, public spaces, and outdoor attractions to begin reopening where social distancing is possible. Recent orders permitting golf courses to resume operation serve as a potential model. Businesses could be required to limit attendance at any single time while public parks could restrict parking, reducing the number of visitors to an acceptable number. All of this could be enforced by local authorities, acting under state guidance. Doing so would serve as a lifeline to small businesses neighboring these attractions or- in the case of private facilities- the attractions themselves.

Again, we appreciate your time and attention to this important issue. We look forward to working with you and the entire panel as the Commonwealth moves to establish a new status quo. If there is any way we can be of assistance in this effort, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



Roy Nascimento, IOM, CCE
President and CEO



Christopher McDermott
Public Affairs Manager