

April 9, 2020

Dear Governor Kemp,

We are Georgia healthcare providers from across the state and we are writing to say that we appreciate your order for Georgians to shelter in place through April 30, your extension of the state of emergency to May 13, and your ban on vacation rentals to slow the spread of SARS CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. We must, however, ask for more. Nations, states, and cities have now proven that aggressive physical distancing measures do indeed work and can protect both citizens and healthcare institutions and workforce. **We ask now that you take additional steps immediately to strengthen your order** by closing loopholes that put lives at risk unnecessarily, including those of the healthcare providers who fight every day in the trenches to save lives. We ask you to implement 2 specific actions without delay.

First, we ask that you amend your executive order to allow local jurisdictions to implement more stringent measures, as needed, to control the pandemic, and that you explicitly order that Georgia's beaches and state parks be closed.

- While we appreciate that you have encouraged citizens to exercise during this difficult time, unfortunately too many individuals do not do so responsibly. Too many Georgians do not adhere to physical distancing at recreational facilities. Unfortunately, members of your administration have encouraged this behavior by making public statements such as, "Georgia – go to the beach, lake or a state park!" with no admonitions to employ physical distancing. This is exactly the wrong message to convey at this time.
- Local elected leaders from Tybee Island to north Georgia have called on you to close beaches and state parks. National forests, such as the Chattahoochee National Forest, have been closed for weeks.
 - The mayor and city council of Tybee Island and the Glynn County commission chair have expressed their distress that the executive order has superseded their own orders and resulted in re-opening of beaches in the midst of a pandemic, putting visitors and local communities at risk.^{1,2}
 - On Monday April 6, a dozen North Georgia county commission chairs wrote a letter to you requesting closure of state parks, as the dramatic influx of visitors imperils not only visitors but also county citizens. Their letter stated, "...the influx of people into our communities has had a staggering detrimental effect on our resources. Our communities simply do not have enough hospital beds or medical personnel to care for the inflated population. Similarly, there is not enough food, dry goods, fuel and other supplies to adequately provide for the numbers we are experiencing."³
- Taking this action quickly will further slow the spread of the virus, particularly in areas of Georgia where health systems are not prepared for a surge in COVID-19 cases.

Second, we ask that you immediately amend your order and explicitly ban in-person worship services for all faiths. This is crucial as we are now in the midst of Passover (April 8-16), with Easter (April 12) and Ramadan (April 23-May 23) rapidly approaching. Our citizens of faith deserve no less from their government given the risk that gatherings, such as these, pose.

- Georgia has already experienced a devastating outbreak in Dougherty County (and surrounding counties) that was associated with two funerals early in the pandemic. The repercussions continue, with this county now one of the most impacted jurisdictions in America, per capita.

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- A church choir practice on March 10 in Washington State became a “superspreader” event resulting in three-fourths of the choir becoming infected and at least two members dying of COVID-19. The choir employed physical distancing and hand hygiene, but infections occurred despite these measures.⁴
- We have known for nearly a month that asymptomatic infection is relatively common and we now know that simply breathing or talking can spread the virus.^{5,6}
- The current language allowing people to gather as long as they are six feet apart creates a false sense of security. Historically speaking, these worship services are very crowded during the respective high holy days, making it difficult to practically implement six-foot physical distancing. It is an invitation for disaster among well-intentioned Georgians of faith.
- You recently stated that you will issue citations to places of worship that do not adhere to the physical distancing requirements in the executive order. Unfortunately, issuing citations after the fact is ineffective and could endanger the health of tens of thousands of Georgians. Easter, April 12, is historically one of the busiest days of the year for people of the Christian faith. **You have an opportunity this week to save an untold number of lives by immediately directing all religious leaders to abstain from face-to-face worship services on Sunday, and for as long as the executive order is in place.**

Taking these more aggressive measures at this time is essential to preserve the lives of Georgians, especially the most vulnerable, and to protect our healthcare workers, our hospitals, and our entire medical system. We also ask that you consider the following before easing the shelter in place order after April 30:

- Projections assume that social distancing measures will continue through May (not April) and that if this occurred, deaths and hospital resource utilization in Georgia would be projected to peak on April 20.⁷ While the implementation of the “shelter in place” order has resulted in an improvement in projections for overall deaths through August 4 (from 3413 to 2630) and hospital resource utilization, as of now there is still projected to be a shortage of ICU beds and ventilators in Georgia. These needs will not be experienced evenly across the state, and while large urban areas like Atlanta will experience larger numbers of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, smaller hospital systems across the state will be overwhelmed even with fewer cases because of reduced capacity, as has occurred at Phoebe Putney. Current projections estimate that on April 20, the peak date for hospital resource utilization:
 - The ICU bed shortage is projected to be 282;
 - The ventilator shortage is projected to be 740.

Prematurely discontinuing “shelter in place” will result in a resurgence of new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, worsening these projections substantially.

- Increasing shelter in place time in Georgia will give the state additional opportunity to vastly increase its testing capacity through commercial labs, the state’s public health lab, and additional partnerships such as the ones with CVS and Ipsom Diagnostics. Current testing capability remains extremely limited in Georgia and, therefore, continues to be rationed based on severity of disease, missing most cases that are mild or asymptomatic but capable of transmitting virus. Georgia ranks 46th among states for per-capita testing.⁸ Widespread testing with rapid turnaround must be a cornerstone of easing physical distancing restrictions.
- Extending this “pause” also will slow the burden on our hospitals and give our healthcare system time to expand ventilator and ICU capacity, alleviate the current shortage of adequate high quality personal protective equipment to protect healthcare providers, and avert overwhelming stress to hospitals, particularly rural and safety net hospitals.

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We appreciate the steps you have taken so far and ask that you now take immediate action on these requests, as every day delayed will result in unnecessary infections, hospitalizations, and deaths in Georgia.

Thank you for your urgent consideration of these requests.

Melanie Thompson, MD

Thacker, Thompson, Bernard, & Nassery MD

Wendy S. Armstrong, MD

Professor of Medicine, Emory University School of Medicine

Jonathan Colasanti, MD, MSPH

Assistant Professor of Medicine and Global Health, Emory University School of Medicine

And the following:

Name and Degree	Healthcare Role	Affiliation	County
Michelle Thomason Sariev, NP	Nurse Practitioner	Thacker, Thompson, Bernard & Nassery, MD	Fulton
Christine M Gisness, MSN, RN, FNP-BC	Nurse Practitioner	Emory/Grady Emergency Medicine	
Daniela Hazelwood, DNP	Nurse Practitioner	Piedmont Hospital	Dekalb
Steven J. Citron, M.D., FSIR	Physician	Radiology Associates of Atlanta	Fulton
Richard Ellin MD	Physician	Kaiser Permanente	Dekalb
Helen Baker, PhD, FNP-BC, RN	Nurse Practitioner	Emory University	Dekalb
Mary Ellen Sweeney MD	Physician	Emory Healthcare	Fulton
Alan Fishman M.D.	Physician		Cobb
Marilyn Whitening, DNP, FNP-C, APRN	Nurse Practitioner	The CarePlace	Douglas
Jimmy Yao, MD	Physician	Northside Hospital	Forsyth
Joni K Lamb, BSN	Nurse		Bryan
James Steinberg, MD	Physician	Emory University Hospital Midtown	Fulton
Margaret Payne PNP	Nurse Practitioner	Dahlonega Pediatrics	Lumpkin
Iris A. Castro-Revoledo, MD	Physician	Emory University	Fulton/DK
Sharon Gridley	Nurse	United Health Group	
Nicole Carlson PhD CNM RN	Nurse-Midwife	Emory University School of Nursing	DeKalb
Glenna S Brewster	Nurse Practitioner	Emory University	
Tasneem Malik	Nurse Practitioner		
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Roseline Jean Louis	Nurse	Emory Health System	
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Gulshan Harjee MD	Physician	Clarkston Community Health Center	Dekalb
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Maura George MD	Physician	Emory University	Dekalb
Antoinette Nguyen, MD, MPH	Physician		Dekalb
Karen Kinsell. MD MPH	Physician	Clay County Medical Center	Clay
Kimberly Barbee	Nurse Practitioner	Schilling Women's Ctr	Henry
Erin Everett	Nurse Practitioner	Druid Hills Primary Care	Dekalb
Rachel Mather MD	Physician	Emory University	Fulton
Jill Jewett, NP-C	Nurse Practitioner	Redmond Regional Medical Center	Floyd
Caroline Donner	Nurse Practitioner	Kaiser Permanente	Fulton
Tara Noorani, FNP	Nurse Practitioner	Ponce Primary Care	Georgia
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Anne Mellinger-Birdsong, MD, MPH, FAAP	Physician	Consultant Emory University, General Medicine & Geriatrics	Dekalb Fulton
Jennifer Lom, MD	Physician		Fulton
Rebecca Stafford, RN, BSN	Nurse	Advanced Care Pediatrics	Fulton
Bernadette Wildemore MD	Physician	Mandes Wildemore, PC	Gwinnett

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James M. Hughes, MD	Physician	Piedmont Cancer Institute	Fulton
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Melissa Adamson RN	Nurse	HIV Dental Alliance	
Gaurav Budhrani MD	Physician	Thacker, Thompson & Bernard MD	Georgia
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Rita Valenti	Nurse	Grady (retired)	Dekalb
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John P Ouderkirk, MD	Physician	AIDS Healthcare Foundation	Fulton
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cc: Kathleen Toomey, MD MPH, Commissioner, Georgia Department of Public Health