Massachusetts barrels ahead with next phase of reopening on Monday

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Massachusetts will move into the third phase of its gradual plan to revive public activity in most of the state on Monday, allowing gyms, museums, movie theaters, and more to resume some operations even as COVID cases surge in other parts of the country.

The Baker administration's decision shifts Massachusetts toward the leading edge of states on the path to reopening, pushing forward despite peers pumping the brakes on their own progress due to concerns about massive outbreaks in the south and west.

Citing positive trends in public health data, Gov. Charlie Baker said Thursday that he is confident the state can loosen restrictions without prompting an infection rebound because bars and nightclubs will remain closed and because residents and businesses continue to abide by safety precautions.

"The success is due in no small part to the vigilance and dedication that has been shown by the people of Massachusetts, but we should not and cannot slow down or step back now," Baker said. "We know that COVID-19 won't be taking any time off this summer, and we need to maintain vigilance if we wish to continue to move forward."

Phase 3 will consist of two smaller steps, though administration officials have not yet announced when the second portion will start. The loosened restrictions in the first step will take effect in Boston on July 13, one week

after every other community in Massachusetts.

Under the first step, movie theaters, museums, fitness centers and some indoor recreation facilities that have all been closed since mid-March will be allowed to reopen so long as they follow industry-specific protocols.

Most will face capacity limits and mandatory cleaning requirements. Indoor and outdoor events such as weddings or parties will not be allowed to open bars or dance floors.

“Going to the gym may not look the same the way it did before the pandemic, but we hope these new protocols will allow more residents to return to exercise and fitness and get back into those routines that they were accustomed to,” Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito said at a press conference alongside Baker and other cabinet officials.

The administration will also update restrictions on gatherings to allow more people to congregate, starting Monday statewide and July 13 in Boston.

Indoor gatherings will be capped at eight people per 1,000 square feet with a maximum of 25, while outdoor enclosed gatherings will be limited to 25 percent of permitted capacity with a maximum of 100. Caps do not apply to unenclosed outdoor events, such as backyard parties or park visits.

Baker said the next step along the path toward the new normal will bring back “some bigger players that will certainly draw more people into indoor settings,” where public health experts say the risk of COVID transmission is far greater than outdoors. That underlines the importance of individual caution, he said.

Phase 3 will last longer than the other phases, and Baker reiterated Thursday that the fourth and final section will not begin until treatment or a vaccine for COVID-19 is available.

Professional sports teams will be permitted to host games without spectators in Massachusetts as part of Phase 3, though Baker said he is “not prepared to sign off” on any plans to bring fans back.

Health care providers will also face a changed landscape in the next phase. Some group treatment programs and day programs that had not been allowed for months can resume, such as community-based day services for adults with intellectual and cognitive disabilities and substance abuse services.

MassHealth telehealth service will continue through the end of 2020, Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders said Thursday, and the administration continues to encourage remote medical appointments “whenever feasible.”

State officials will also update visitation guidelines for the next step in the reopening plan. Starting Monday, 24/7 congregate care programs will need to follow less strict distancing requirements, while long-term care facilities including nursing homes and assisted living residences can start allowing minimum visits of 30 minutes rather than 10 minutes.

“We know that some of the measures that were put into place to keep residents safe, including restricting visitations, have been incredibly difficult on family members and friends who wanted to visit loved ones,” Sudders said. “I’m certain that this is welcome news ahead of the holiday weekend.”

Baker, who said he had received “heartbreaking” letters from residents who could not visit their family in long-term care facilities, said he planned to visit his father in such a home during the holiday weekend.

The governor had initially said he wanted to track two weeks of data from indoor dining before deciding when to start the next phase, but Thursday’s announcement comes only 10 days after dine-in restaurant service resumed.

Asked if he had enough of a sense of indoor dining's impact, Baker said the "overwhelming response we've gotten from the folks we've talked to is that people are abiding by the rules."

State leaders are moving forward with confidence, buoyed by a massive drop in the average positive test rate to near or below 2 percent and a decline in the number of hospitalized COVID patients 79 percent below the mid-April surge period. Those indicators come alongside a death toll above 8,000.

Elsewhere in the United States, though, the virus is reaching new heights. Driven by rapidly growing outbreaks in Florida, Texas, Arizona and other southern and western states, the country has observed a higher average of new daily cases over the past week-plus than ever before, even as deaths continue to slowly decelerate.

"We find ourselves in an important place in time as a Commonwealth as we start to see what a new normal will look like, even while other states are sadly struggling to bring the virus under control," Housing and Economic Development Secretary Mike Kennealy said at Thursday's press conference.

Most northeast states, which were home to devastating outbreaks in the spring, are on positive trends similar to that in Massachusetts. In some, leaders have responded to the worsening national infection numbers by slowing some reopening progress.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said this week he would pause plans to resume indoor dining due to concerns about the rest of the country, though on Thursday he increased allowable capacity for indoor gatherings to a maximum of 100 and for outdoor gatherings to a maximum of 500, both far above what Baker will allow.

Baker told reporters his administration's plan has undergone rigorous review from medical experts, and he said he does not

think Massachusetts will experience a similar surge as other states because of how the reopening is structured and because residents have remained committed to precautions.

Bars and nightclubs will not open until Phase 4, which Baker described as a key step to ensure safety.

“The primary driver of much of the significant increase in positive tests in a number of states has been the reopening of bars and nightclubs,” Baker said. “Obviously bars and nightclubs are sitting in Phase 4 under our guidance, and there was a reason for that: as difficult as it is for the people who operate and work in those institutions, we could not figure out a way to do that safely.”

Business groups reacted to the announcement with mixed feelings, with the National Federation of Independent Business of Massachusetts saying the good news comes amid “many shops and restaurants closing their doors permanently.”

The right-leaning Massachusetts Fiscal Alliance, which has been one of Baker’s most vocal critics during the state of emergency, said the next stage of reopening “is the best gift Massachusetts taxpayers can give our country on its Birthday.”

“With over 100 days being locked down, and Phase 3 beginning on Monday, the Governor is finally putting his faith in the people of Massachusetts to make the best decisions for themselves,” MFA spokesman Paul Craney said in a press release. “Every day that goes by, it’s clearer that this lockdown is yesterday’s news and it should never happen again.”