

First case of coronavirus hits Bristol County

Here are the coronavirus numbers by county in Massachusetts as of Saturday, March 14. There is now one case in Bristol County, but the exact location has not been reported.

Out of 138 total cases, 104 are from a Biogen meeting in Cambridge held in late February. Of the 138 cases, only 11 needed to be hospitalized.



Source: Massachusetts Public Health.

Massachusetts Public Health Announces New Clinical Protocols for Coronavirus Testing

The Baker-Polito Administration continues to take action to expedite COVID-19 testing and ensure access to treatment. The Department of Public Health (DPH) and MassHealth released guidance related to access to clinical testing and care, respectively, in response to COVID-19. This announcement was made this morning at a press conference where Governor Baker announced the creation of a new COVID-19 Response Command Center.

Under DPH's new clinical guidance, clinicians no longer need

to receive testing approval from the State Lab prior to submitting specimens for patients that meet the following specific criteria:

- Symptomatic health care workers and emergency medical services personnel who have worked while sick
- Hospitalized individuals suspected of having COVID-19 infection
- Individuals who have had close contact with a someone with confirmed COVID-19 while symptomatic in congregate settings and clusters of acute respiratory illness in congregate settings
- Those with symptoms linked to recent travel to high-risk countries

For patients who do not meet these criteria, clinicians will continue to follow the existing protocols – call the EPI line to gain testing approval and then submit specimens to the State Lab.

Additional changes to procedures include that clinicians only need to collect one specimen type for testing at both the State Lab and commercial labs. This change was based on new CDC guidance that now requires one nasal swab instead of two. As clinicians change their practice and follow the new guidance, this change will allow more individuals to be tested.

Clinicians can also send specimens from suspected COVID-19 patients without approval from DPH to commercial labs that received federal approval to conduct COVID-19 testing.

The Department of Public Health will be releasing the number of people tested for COVID-19 in Massachusetts Beginning on Wednesday, March 18. Updated numbers will be provided weekly by 12pm on mass.gov/COVID19. This is in addition to daily case updates posted online at 4pm.

MassHealth – Massachusetts' Medicaid program – released new

policies to provide guidance and clarification for MassHealth plans to ensure access to care in response to COVID-19. These policies expand telehealth coverage, allow 90-day refills of prescriptions and early refills, make billing for COVID-19 tests easier for providers, and remind providers that there are no copays for lab tests and pharmacies that they cannot deny medications if a member cannot pay. This announcement follows other focused efforts by Massachusetts to ensure that residents can access coverage for testing and treatment for COVID-19, including the Massachusetts Health Connector announced a special enrollment period to ensure everyone who wants access to covered coronavirus services has it, and the Division of Insurance announced that Massachusetts health insurers are now required to cover the cost of testing and treatment for members who may be affected by the COVID-19.

The public is reminded that real-time COVID-19 information, resources, and referrals in multiple languages can be found by calling Massachusetts 2-1-1. Callers dialing 2-1-1 will hear an automated menu of options. Callers press 2-6 for coronavirus. Residents can also reach 2-1-1 through a live chat option on the Massachusetts 2-1-1 website. Through this partnership with Massachusetts 2-1-1 announced yesterday, DPH subject matter experts are expanding access to information 24/7, and empowering call operators to provide the latest information about prevention, symptoms, and treatment, information about testing, and guidance for travel. This new service is in addition to a dedicated site mass.gov/COVID19, which is updated daily with information and resources.

Governor Charlie Baker declared a State of Emergency to support the Commonwealth's response to coronavirus. The Administration has updated guidance to the general public, specifically urging older adults and those with health issues to avoid large crowds and events. The Administration also released new policies to protect individuals in long-term care facilities, and those served in community-based and congregate

care settings from respiratory illnesses.

Individuals who live in households with vulnerable people, like elderly parents, should also consider avoiding crowds to mitigate risk. This guidance is posted on the Department of Public Health's website, mass.gov/COVID19.

The public is reminded of steps to take to limit the spread of COVID-19:

- Cover your mouth – when you cough or sneeze use a tissue or your inner elbow, not your hands
- Wash your hands – with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based sanitizing gel
- Stay home if you are sick – and avoid close contact with others

The Administration will continue to update the public on further developments and individuals are encouraged to consult both the Department of Public Health and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention websites for the most up to date information.

The latest information and guidance regarding COVID-19 is always available at mass.gov/COVID19.

Massachusetts casinos closing for two weeks as coronavirus prevention measure

By Colin A. Young
State House News Service

Massachusetts gaming regulators and its licensees agreed to a two-week shutdown of the state's slots parlor and two resorts casinos Saturday and are working to finalize the plan as state government takes serious steps to try to staunch the spread of the coronavirus that's infected 123 people in the state.

Gaming operations are expected to cease by late Saturday night and other operations at the casinos – hotels, restaurants, clubs and retail shops – would have to shut down by Sunday under the plan the commission authorized its staff to put into writing for final approval. Another meeting is expected to finalize the plan.

The casino operators said they would need some time to ensure the closures are orderly and safe, and to rebook overnight guests at other hotels.

The Mass. Gaming Commission held an emergency meeting via conference call at 10 a.m. Saturday morning to discuss the "operational status of gaming licensees in light of the coronavirus." Representatives from Plainridge Park Casino in Plainville, MGM Springfield and Encore Boston Harbor in Everett participated in the call and each business said it was fully on board with the commission's action.

Commission staffers said discussions around the plan were collaborative with the casino companies and evolved over the last few weeks. Interim Executive Director Karen Wells said the licensees agreed to "an orderly closure from the commission."

Brian Gullbrants, president of Encore Boston Harbor, said he thinks it is "prudent at this time to pause our operations." A representative of MGM Springfield said the company is "fully supportive of whatever your decision may be."

The change will have economic impacts on the state's coffers, and the pocketbooks of the thousands of people who have found jobs in the relatively young Massachusetts gaming world. All

three companies pledged during Saturday's meeting to pay its full-time employees during the two-week shutdown.

The commission is due to publish February revenue figures on Monday, but the state can typically rely on about \$21 million in monthly revenue from its three gambling halls.

Commissioner Eileen O'Brien called the decision "the only prudent thing to do" given the public health emergency.

"I agree that we need to be better safe than sorry," commissioner Enrique Zuniga said.

The commission said its operations staff will coordinate with the casinos to figure out the fine details of the "orderly closure" and expects to hold another meeting this weekend to discuss those details.

All three facilities said they expect to maintain a small team of staff – management and security, mostly – during the closures.

Around the country, other states have shut down or limited casino operations as American society adjusts to social distancing in a public health emergency.

Illinois on Friday suspended riverboat casino operations and Ohio ordered its gaming facilities to either close or keep the number of customers and workers present below 100.

On Friday, Gov. Charlie Baker banned most gatherings of 250 people or more, the Catholic Church in Boston suspended Masses until further notice and many local school systems have canceled classes for at least a week. In Boston's case, schools will likely be closed until late April.

Sporting events, concerts, theater performances and conferences have been called off. A massive chunk of the state's workforce is adjusting to working remotely and state agencies like the Gaming Commission are operating in uncharted

waters.

Saturday morning's unusual virtual emergency meeting was made possible by the fact that Baker this week suspended parts of the Open Meeting Law in an attempt to allow government to function without putting people in physical proximity of one another.

The commission posted a public notice of the meeting – including the dial-in information for any member of the public who wanted to “attend” the meeting – around 11 p.m. Friday.

Alma del Mar Charter School will be closed March 16-17 due to Coronavirus

The following is a press release from Will Gardner, Executive Director Alma del Mar Charter School in New Bedford:

“Out of an abundance of caution, Alma del Mar will be closed Monday, March 16 and Tuesday, March 17. Alma staff will spend these days further assessing the rapidly changing situation surrounding the Coronavirus, and whether we need to close school for an extended period of time. Any updates will be communicated to families through mass text, social media, and www.almadelmar.org

As of this writing, there are no confirmed or suspected cases of coronavirus in our schools, or in the city of New Bedford. We are making this difficult decision in order to prioritize the health and safety of our community.

Today, March 13, scholars have been sent home with homework

packets in the case of an extended closure. Our goal for this at-home work is that it will be independent and not require the use of the internet, a computer, or a phone. Should we need to close school for a more extended period, we will be in touch with additional work for scholars and resources for at-home learning.

We recognize that many of our scholars, families, and staff are increasingly concerned about the COVID-19 situation. Our Leadership Team and Operations Teams are working diligently to ensure we have a thoughtful response. At the same time, we realize what a strain our schools' closure for any period puts on families and working parents. We do not make this decision lightly. We want to do our part to ensure we are protecting the public and mitigating community spread of infectious disease.

We recommend that all scholars, families, and staff follow all public health guidelines from the Massachusetts Department of Health and the CDC. Medical questions and concerns should be brought to a school nurse, your own doctor, or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health at 617-983-6800.

Thank you for your help to keep our community healthy and safe. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact any school leader."

New Bedford Public Schools will be closed until March 23. Details **here**.

New Bedford Public Schools to

close until at least March 23 due to Coronavirus

Effective immediately, as a preventative action New Bedford Public Schools will close through at least Friday, March 20, 2020, Superintendent Thomas Anderson announced late today. "Out of an abundance of caution and to support the effort to stem the potential spread of coronavirus in our region, New Bedford Public Schools will be closed Monday, March 16 through Friday, March 20, 2020. Schools are currently scheduled to reopen on Monday, March, 23, 2020. This action is being taken after close consultation with all other school districts in our region and across Massachusetts, the Mayor's office and City officials."

Due to rolling cancellations across Massachusetts and Rhode Island, the likelihood of mass absenteeism has increased significantly since the City of New Bedford's announcement earlier this morning. New Bedford Public Schools will ensure that students' learning remains a priority during the city's state of emergency.

While schools are closed, students and their families will receive updates and information regarding academic opportunities and services such as school-provided meals. New Bedford Public Schools will continue to keep families informed via social media and announcements.

All central office and school administrators as well as all 12-month personnel, including facilities and maintenance staff, will report to work as scheduled. All other staff do not need to report during this time.

NBPS encourages students to make every effort to continue their learning by reading as much as possible. This adjusts the last day of school to Wednesday, June 24, 2020.

While Monday, March 23, is the designated reopening date, Superintendent Anderson advised students, staff and families to continue to closely monitor the NBPS website, district social media, and local media outlets for any updates to closure status during this rapidly evolving situation. The closings are effective Monday, March 16; SATs scheduled for this weekend will remain available for students who have signed up and plan to complete the tests.

Mayor Jon Mitchell updates the public on New Bedford's response to COVID-19

Mayor Jon Mitchell joined City officials on Friday to update the public on the City's response to COVID-19. In accordance his legal authority, Mayor Mitchell has declared that a state of emergency now exists in New Bedford. This allows for the suspension of certain rules to expedite the procurement of goods and services, as well as allowing the Mayor to take reasonable steps to ensure public safety.

The Mayor and City officials offered the following guidelines on Friday, March 13:

Events

Public events: All non-essential public community events greater than 100 people will be postponed or cancelled.

In particular, the Mayor's state of the city address, which is the second-largest of its kind in the state, will be postponed.

Special event permits: All special permits will be reviewed. Effective this Monday, the City will revoke all permits for indoor activities greater than 100 people, and all other special event will be subject to review of the Health Department to assess the risk of transmission.

School events: Superintendent Thomas Anderson has announced a similar curtailment of school events.

Other events: With respect to events that do not require some form of public approval or permit, Mayor Mitchell strongly discouraged the holding of non-essential indoor events of greater than 100 people.



City Facilities and Board/Commission Meetings

City facilities:

In addition to curtailing events at public places, certain facilities will be closed.

Effective Monday morning: All senior centers in the city will be closed until further notice. Likewise, the City is closing the adult day facility in Brooklawn Park, but will provide the families of the facility's patrons a reasonable opportunity to find alternate care during the day.

Buttonwood Park Zoo: All indoor events at the Buttonwood Park Zoo will be postponed or cancelled.

Board and Commission meetings:

Last night, the Governor issued an executive order that liberalizes the requirements of the state's opening meeting law. The City's attorneys are reviewing the order now, but in any case, the City will take every step consistent with the law to minimize the attendance at board and commission meetings, including the deferring of items for which board action is not urgent.

City employees

The City is working hard to ensure the safety of our employees. For starters, the City's custodial staff is strenuously cleaning buildings, and is emphasizing of course proper hygiene.

All out-of-state employee travel through the end of April will be postponed or cancelled, as well as any non-essential employee travel of greater than twenty miles. The Superintendent has announced a similar curtailment of school field trips.

The City is advising department heads that employees whose duties and responsibilities allow them to work at home, should make arrangements to do so.

The City strongly encourages all employers to employ similar protections and accommodations for their employees.

Paying bills online or by mail

To decrease person-to-person contact in public buildings, and help protect the health of employees and residents, the City is encouraging residents to pay bills remotely, either online or by mail. Payments can be made online at the City's website, www.newbedford-ma.gov, and selecting 'Pay Bills' directly on the home page. To mail payments, residents can use the mailing address printed on their bills or mail their bills directly to the City Treasurer at the following address:

City Hall – Treasurer's Office
133 William Street, Room 103

New Bedford, MA 02740

Mayor Mitchell made the following statement at Friday's update:

"Good morning. There's a great deal of anxiety in our city, across our country and indeed around the world about the effects of the coronavirus outbreak. Nothing quite like this has happened in our lifetimes, so it is understandable that people are on edge. I am here today to provide an update on the city's latest efforts and to help you stay informed, prepare yourself and your family, and take actions to stem the spread of the virus.

"I want to begin by saying that the virus is coming, if it's not already here. While there has yet to be a confirmed case in Greater New Bedford, we should not be fooled. As has been well chronicled, the limited number of test kits in the United States has inhibited the ability of the medical community to determine with confidence who has been infected. And we know, based on the recent outbreaks in China, Italy and other places, the virus has the potential to spread faster than our healthcare system can address.

"Our work has been focused on three goals: to slow the transmission of the virus in our city and region, make preparations to continue essential city services, and ensure

the health and safety of city employees and our residents. The strategy is to “flatten the curve” of viral spread, that is, to slow the transmission of the disease so that our health care system can keep up with the flow of patients until the virus eventually peters out. Getting out ahead of the virus through appropriate social distancing and encouraging proper hygiene is essential. That is why, even though residents in our region may not be infected yet, we have been taking proactive steps, including the cancelling of this weekend’s half marathon.

“Our decisions are informed by the advice of health care experts, and are consistent with guidance from federal and state agencies. Every morning I am briefed by our health director and our public safety agencies on the latest developments, so that as the situation evolves, we can make informed decisions in the public interest. Under the authority vested in me under law, I have declared that a state of emergency now exists in New Bedford. The authority allows the mayor to suspend certain rules concerning procurement of good and services, and generally affords the mayor the ability to take reasonable steps to ensure public safety.

“This is one of the challenges our city and our country faces in which the actions of private individuals is indispensable to success. More than anything else, proper hygiene is a must. Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently, with soap and hot water. Make sure your loved ones do the same.

“Be especially conscience of what you touch. Avoid as much as possible highly touched surfaces, such as railings, door knobs, and elevator buttons. Don’t touch your face. Stop shaking hands.

“And again, if you feel sick, go home and call your doctor.

“All of these measures and more, along with links to relevant state and federal guidance, can be found on the City’s

website. We'll continue to push out more updates so that you and your family remained informed, and I ask you to share with others.

"Our work here is about serious preparation, not panic. Each of us has a role to play to ensure the health and safety of our fellow New Bedfordites. I thank you in advance for your understanding, but more importantly, for the role you play in this collective effort."

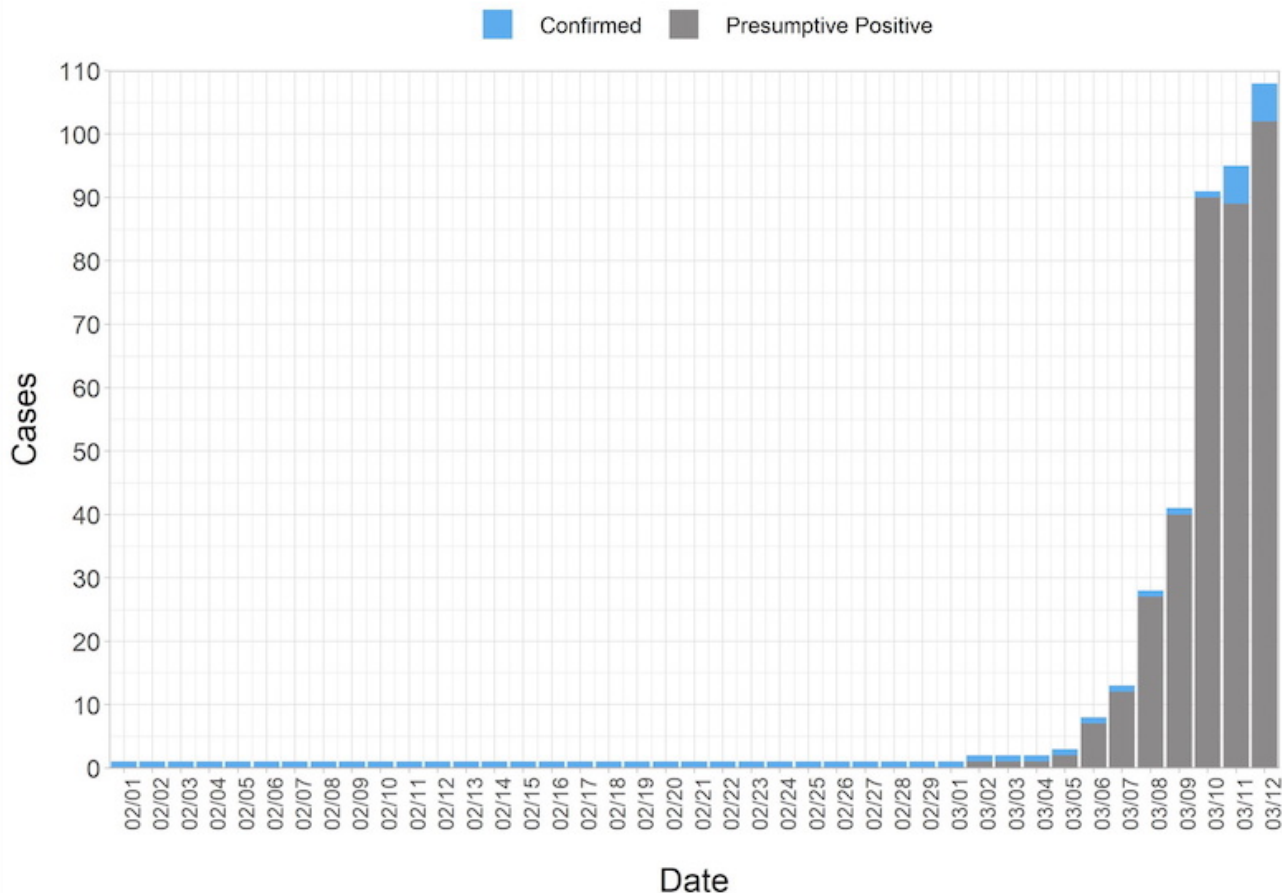
Coronavirus testing limitations in Massachusetts a growing concern for Governor Baker

By Colin A. Young and Matt Murphy
State House News Service

As the state works to manage the spread of the coronavirus, Gov. Charlie Baker on Thursday issued his most forceful call yet for the federal government to allow private labs and hospital facilities to test for the virus as the number of cases statewide climbed to 108.

COVID-19 cases in Massachusetts

Total includes confirmed and presumptive positive cases. Source: Mass. DPH



Testing has emerged as a key aspect of the national response to the outbreak of the newest coronavirus and the COVID-19 respiratory illness it causes. Without enough tests, public health officials are not able to wrap their arms around the full scope of the outbreak.

Guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control generally determine who should be tested, but anecdotal evidence suggests that not all people who have been exposed to the virus qualify to be tested at this point.

After meeting with local officials in Pittsfield, where it appears the coronavirus has spread among the community without a known link to an infected person or high-risk region of the world, Baker said Massachusetts recently got enough testing supplies to test an additional 5,000 people but still needs to significantly ramp up its testing.

"We certainly believe we have what I would describe as an adequate supply today, but as I said in my remarks, we need the federal government – the CDC and FDA in particular – to give hospitals and testing facilities here in Massachusetts that have the capacity to test the material and then the approval they need to actually begin to test themselves," Baker said.

"The fact that the state lab is the single source of testing at this time is not adequate," he said.

Baker would not say exactly how many people have already been tested in Massachusetts, but said the state now has the ability to test 5,000 people in addition to the "several thousand" it had the ability to test before getting the latest supply.

On Tuesday, Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel said the state had recently received enough kits and supplies to test 2,000 new people and had already tested roughly 400 patients. Bharel said an approval from the federal government to automate part of the testing process would also allow the state to increase its testing capacity from 50 to 200 per day.

"Thankfully, the Massachusetts DPH lab is more advanced than some other states. That enables the lab to now process four times as many samples as it was last week," Baker said Thursday. "But we need more testing capability. And we need the federal government to get there."

Baker said his administration has been in touch with the state's Congressional delegation and the Trump administration about securing approvals for additional testing sites, including hospitals and private labs.

"We have hospitals in eastern Massachusetts, central Massachusetts, western Massachusetts, we have labs not related to hospitals, independent privately operated labs, all of which have the capacity to do this if they can get several

requirements and authorizations from the feds,” Baker said.

The number of cases of coronavirus in Massachusetts reached triple digits on Thursday, with the Department of Public Health reporting a total of 108 cases, including six confirmed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. That’s 13 more cases than were reported on Wednesday.

A total of 82 cases, up from 77 a day earlier, are being linked to the Biogen leadership meeting at the Long Wharf Marriott in late February.

Worcester County was the only county with known exposure to COVID-19 to not see an uptick in cases Thursday, while there still have been no reported cases Hampshire, Hampden, Franklin, Bristol, Plymouth, Barnstable, Dukes and Nantucket counties.

Berkshire County, where Baker was in the afternoon, now has a total of nine cases. Public health officials also added a new category to its tracking to report that eight cases are associated with Berkshire Medical Center.

At that hospital, Baker said from Pittsfield, officials are concerned about their ability to appropriately staff the facility given the fact that some workers have been quarantined out of concern that they might have been exposed to the coronavirus.

But because of the emergency declaration he ordered this week, Baker said the state’s Board of Registration in Nursing “put in place an emergency procedure that will make it possible for licensed out-of-state medical professionals and nurses to get licensed here in Massachusetts in one day.”

“One of the things we heard from the delegation and from the mayor about was a more aggressive process for nurses and other medical professionals who are licensed and qualified in other states to be able to get licensed and qualified in

Massachusetts quickly,” the governor said after meeting with Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyler, Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Sen. Adam Hinds and others.

Hinds tweeted Thursday afternoon that the steps the state has taken so far to help Berkshire County are only the start.

“The Berkshires is the first area of the Commonwealth where we are seeing community transmission of COVID-19 of unknown origin. Approving interstate medical licenses to practice in Massachusetts, supporting public and private labs to test and expedite COVID-19 results, and provide cutting-edge equipment to hospitals and healthcare organizations in our region is just the beginning of what is necessary for the Berkshires to mitigate and curb the virus’ spread,” the Pittsfield Democrat posted.

Reps. William “Smitty” Pignatelli and John Barrett III, both from the Berkshires, also have filed legislation to create a new fund to assist hourly wage workers who may have to miss work due to infection, quarantine or isolation related to COVID-19.

Massachusetts Restricts Visitors to Nursing Home, Rest Homes to Reduce Risk of Coronavirus

The Baker-Polito Administration released policies restricting visitors to nursing homes and rest homes in order to protect older adults at higher risk for Coronavirus (COVID-19) and

other respiratory illness. Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders, Department of Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel and their teams reviewed the guidance with long term care facility operators via teleconference today.

This action follows Governor Charlie Baker's Tuesday declaration of a State of Emergency in Massachusetts that was ratified by the Public Health Council earlier today granting the Commissioner of Public Health with the authority to implement the Governor's State of Emergency.

With this authority, the Commissioner of Public Health issued an order requiring all facilities – nursing and rest homes – to actively screen all visitors and to take measures to restrict visitors under certain circumstances.

"Everyone has a role to play to mitigate the spread of the Coronavirus outbreak in Massachusetts, and it's particularly important that we take precautions to keep older adults and those with health conditions safe," said Governor Charlie Baker. "This new guidance for long-term care facilities is critical to protecting older adults from COVID-19 and we appreciate the public's willingness to observe these important rules for the foreseeable future."

"Today's actions are being taken to protect older adults that are particularly vulnerable to coronavirus and other respiratory diseases, as we have seen as its spread across the world, including the United States," said Secretary Marylou Sudders. "Massachusetts, as we all know has an aging population – with 20% of residents being over 60 – and so we needed to act to protect our older residents, especially those in long term care facilities."

"Our goal at DPH is to protect the health and well-being of all Massachusetts residents, especially those at highest risk for COVID-19," said Commissioner Monica Bharel, MD, MPH. "We will continue to update our guidance as this outbreak

evolves.”

This guidance outlines how these facilities should protect older adult residents, who are at higher risk for Coronavirus. The guidance includes the following restrictions:

- Banning visitors who show signs or symptoms of a respiratory infection (fever, cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat)
- Visitors will be prohibited if in the last 14 days they had contact with someone with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19, are under investigation for COVID-19 or has been sick
- Visitors will be prohibited if they have travelled internationally in the last 14 days or are residing in a community where community-based spread of COVID-19 is occurring
- Visitors will not be allowed to visit long term care facilities if they currently feel sick or exhibit symptoms

In addition to specific recommendations for long term care facilities, the Administration updated its guidance to the general public, specifically urging older adults and those with health issues to avoid large crowds and events. Individuals who live in households with vulnerable people, like elderly parents, should also consider avoiding crowds to mitigate risk. This guidance is posted on the Department of Public Health’s website, www.mass.gov/2019coronavirus.

The public is reminded of steps to take to limit the spread of COVID-19:

- Cover your mouth – when you cough or sneeze use a tissue or your inner elbow, not your hands
- Wash your hands – with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based sanitizing gel
- Stay home if you are sick – and avoid close contact with others

The Administration will continue to update the public on further developments and individuals are encouraged to consult

both the Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention websites for the most up to date information.

Massachusetts Coronavirus Quarantine Numbers Pass 1,000, Most Have Completed Monitoring

By Chris Lisinski
State House News Service

More than 1,000 Massachusetts residents have been subjected to quarantine since the start of a coronavirus outbreak in the state, about 60 percent of whom have completed monitoring.

The latest numbers from the state released Wednesday showed 445 individuals are under quarantine or undergoing monitoring for the COVID-19 illness, while another 638 finished that process and are no longer in quarantine.

Since last week, the last time public health officials released quarantine numbers, the total number of Bay Staters who are in or have completed quarantine increased about 300. Over that same span, the amount of confirmed COVID-19 cases ballooned from just one to 92.

A daily update on cases is expected around 4 p.m. Wednesday.

Gov. Charlie Baker declared a state of emergency on Tuesday and imposed limits on state employee travel as the state began shifting its approach to focus on mitigation. The governor

encouraged employers to let employees work remotely, if possible.

Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel said the state is “at a critical point in this outbreak,” particularly because some of the seven cases in Berkshire County could not be traced back to international travel or to an isolated and known source of transmission.

On Wednesday morning, Bharel received new authority to take prompt actions as necessary during the state’s response to the virus.

Following a vote from the Public Health Council, Bharel will have the sole authority to order isolation or quarantine for patients in coronavirus cases, which under statute normally requires action from her in conjunction with the council. Local boards of health can also issue similar orders.

The council also voted unanimously Wednesday to give Bharel broader authority to take prompt action in response to any unforeseen developments as part of the public health emergency.

“Our goal is to prevent the spread in our communities and reduce the number of people infected,” Bharel said.

The emergency declaration, she said, “prepares us for the potential of what’s to come.”

All but one of the state’s 92 COVID-19 cases are presumptive positive, meaning they have not yet been confirmed by the CDC. Public health officials said 70 cases trace back to a late February executive meeting that Biogen held in Boston.

Council members raised concerns at the meeting about the impact on health care workers and on municipalities. Dr. Edward Bernstein, a professor of emergency medicine at Boston University, asked about plans to limit exposure for hospital

workers and other providers as well as patients.

Bharel replied that the state would offer frequent communication across the health care system, and she said the state received confirmation Tuesday that it will receive additional personal protective equipment from a national stockpile to supplement “dwindling supplies.”

“In Berkshire County, we’re working with them so their health care workers and their patients can be prioritized to be tested there,” Bharel said, noting that Centers for Disease Control guidelines currently allow the tests only for patients displaying symptoms.

Responding to a question from Upton Town Manager Derek Brindisi about municipal access to protective equipment and hand sanitizer, Bharel said materials the state will receive from the national stockpile are ‘for all individuals who need it appropriately.’”

The state expanded its testing capacity from 50 patients per day to 200 and recently received another 2,000 testing kits, each of which can handle multiple patients. However, only the State Public Health Laboratory can conduct tests, and other hospitals or commercial laboratories cannot do so until they get approval from federal authorities.

Bharel said it will be “very helpful” for other labs to gain that ability as council members noted the importance of further increasing testing capacity.

“It doesn’t seem that 2,000 tests is going to meet the exponential curve we’re seeing in other states,” Bernstein said.

With Emergency Declaration, Massachusetts Adopts New Coronavirus Strategy

By Matt Murphy and Colin A. Young
State House News Service

With the number of cases of coronavirus more than doubling from the day before, Gov. Charlie Baker declared a state of emergency Tuesday and imposed broad restrictions on travel for many state employees as Massachusetts moved into a new phase of its response to the global viral outbreak.

Baker had been in Utah on vacation since Friday night, but opted to return to Massachusetts a couple days early as the situation on the ground worsened and the number of coronavirus cases climbed to 92, up from 41 just a day before.

Seventy of those cases, public officials said, were linked to a leadership meeting of Biogen employees in Boston in late February, but additional cases, including a handful in the Berkshires, had no known origin and are being treated as the first evidence of “community spread.”



Massachusetts Public Health statistics as of 10 March.

Baker’s declaration of a state of emergency puts Massachusetts in the company of neighboring states like Connecticut, New York and Rhode Island, where those state governors have already taken a similar step.

The escalation of the state’s response came as a wide array of private institutions began limiting large gatherings and canceling conferences and non-essential travel, and the **city of Boston canceled its upcoming St. Patrick’s Day parade** and

the political breakfast on Sunday.

"There's no question that the efforts to mitigate the spread of this virus will be disruptive," Baker said, later adding, "I want to be clear that state government will continue to operate uninterrupted."

Baker said the declaration would give his administration more "flexibility" to respond to the outbreak, including ordering the cancellation of large events or accessing buildings to store protective equipment for first responders.

Under his order, executive branch employees will be restricted from traveling out of state for work, and the administration is encouraging employees to postpone personal international travel. He also said state workers should, if possible, work from home, and asked private employers to follow suit whenever possible. The restrictions will be revisited in 30 days, or sooner if the situation allows, Baker said.

"We are at a critical point in this outbreak. We're making specific recommendations that will have a big impact on limiting the spread of disease in our communities. These measures are based on the evidence and facts that we know about this disease and in consultation with the CDC," said Department of Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel. "We will need everybody's cooperation and assistance. We understand that these actions may have a significant impact on the lives of our residents."

Baker said he was advising older residents and those with underlying health issues to avoid large crowds, including concert venues, conferences and sporting events, though he said he was not prepared to ask schools or professional leagues to cancel their events. He said there was still time for the Boston Athletic Association to make a call on the marathon in April.

"We think large gatherings are probably not a great idea,"

Baker said.

Secretary of Health and Human Services Marylou Sudders said there were 51 new presumptive positives cases to report Tuesday. About three-quarters of the total cases – 70 of the 92 – have connections to the Biogen conference in Boston last month which has been linked to dozens of infections, Sudders said, and four were directly related to international travel. The remaining 18 cases are “under investigation because they’re newly reported,” she said.

Fifty-two of the patients are men and 40 are women. Six of the patients are hospitalized.

Middlesex County has the greatest number of presumptive cases, 41, followed by 22 in Norfolk County, 20 in Suffolk County, seven in Berkshire County, and one each in Essex and Worcester counties.

The seven cases in Berkshire County seem to be most concerning to state public health officials because they cannot link all of those cases to recent international travel or to isolated and known chains of transmission.

“Here in Massachusetts, person to person transmission of the virus in the community is beginning to occur among individuals without identifiable risk factors,” Bharel said. “As community transmission of COVID-19 becomes more common, the public health approach shifts to one of mitigation and that is reducing the impact.”

At one point during Tuesday’s press conference, Baker referred to “the Berkshire issue” as one of the reasons, along with the increase to 92 total cases, that he “would have to say the risk is increased.” Previously, the governor and other state officials had said the coronavirus risk in Massachusetts was “low.”

Bharel said DPH is assisting local officials in the Berkshires

by facilitating the surveillance and testing of health care workers and patients and is in contact multiple times a day with the local authorities. DPH has also dispatched a public health expert to be on the ground in the Berkshires to assist.

The public health commissioner also announced Tuesday that the state's request last week for personal protective gear from the stash maintained by the Strategic National Stockpile had been granted.

She said DPH specifically asked for stores of face masks, gowns, gloves and eye protection from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the gear is expected to arrive "shortly." Some of it will be immediately sent to Berkshire County.

Health care providers currently have enough equipment, but the stockpile delivery will be needed to meet expected demand, Bharel said. She said the lab was running 24 hours a day and had "adequate supplies and adequate staffing" to meet demand at this time. The current turnaround time for tests is 24 to 48 hours, and the state just received another 2,000 testing kits.

The commissioner also said Massachusetts received a key approval to automate part of the coronavirus testing protocol that will increase the State Laboratory's capacity to test patients from 50 per day to 200. Bharel said the state has tested roughly 400 people since it began testing a little more than two weeks ago.

Sudders said DPH on Wednesday also will update the guidance it issued to nursing homes on Feb. 27 and will then hold a call with nursing and rest home operators to discuss the details before it is implemented statewide.

"Specifically, nursing homes will be directed to actively screen and restrict access to visitors to ensure the safety and health of residents and staff. No visitor access for

anyone who displays signs or symptoms of a respiratory infection, such as fever, cough, shortness of breath or sore throat, or in the last 14 days has had contact with someone with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 or is an individual who is under active investigation for COVID-19," the secretary said.

She added, "We will also be asking rest home operators and nursing homes to confirm that their employees are not sick, they've not had travel, they've not had close proximity to sick persons, to a sick person with under investigation for COVID-19 for 14 days."

People who have traveled outside the United States in the last 14 days or who live "in a community where community-based spread of COVID-19 is occurring" will also be barred from visiting nursing homes, Sudders said. Exceptions will be made for people in end-of-life or hospice care, she said.

To give local school districts the flexibility to make decisions about temporary coronavirus-related closures, Baker said the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is going to give school systems "relief from attendance and school year requirements."

He said no school will be required to stay in session for the school year beyond its scheduled 185th day of classes and that DESE will calculate chronic absenteeism at schools – part of the state's usual accountability measures – as of Monday, March 2 so as to not count absences for the remainder of the year against a school.

Baker thanked the Legislature for its commitment to pass a \$15 million coronavirus aid bill next week, and said he anticipated that a large portion of the money would be directed into communities for first responders. A Senate official said the funding bill will be flexible for the administration and DPH to use as it sees fit.

Harvard University and Amherst College were among a number of higher education institutions that said Tuesday they were canceling class for the rest of the semester and transitioning to online learning for students to finish their course work.

But when asked if the University of Massachusetts or other state universities and community colleges should take similar precautions, Baker said that was the subject of ongoing discussions on the campuses.

"That's obviously very disruptive," Baker said.

Some of what the administration was recommending was already being adopted in the private sector.

The Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce announced within about 15 minutes of the governor's press conference Tuesday that "effective immediately through Friday, May 1, 2020, in-person Chamber programs and events will be rescheduled, include a virtual option, or be only virtual."

Massachusetts High Technology Council President Chris Anderson said he has spent the past several days seeking guidance from member companies about what they're doing to protect the health and safety of employees.

Anderson said, in an email, that consistent with the input he received the council will postpone all events expected to attract 25 or more attendees through April, including its March 26 Women in Leadership Initiative Roundtable and the council's inaugural MATTERS Growth and Competitiveness Conference on April 7.

The Massachusetts Democratic Party said that based on the afternoon updates from public health officials it was temporarily postponing party caucuses, which have been taking place on weekends to elect delegates to the Democratic Party Convention in Lowell in May and have been an early battleground for the Ed Markey and Joseph Kennedy III Senate

campaigns.