

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.