

Ban on large gatherings in effect; Multnomah County, Portland declare states of emergency

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The interim guidance we're providing is based on what is currently known about COVID-19. Multnomah County will update this interim guidance as additional information becomes available.

March 12, 2020

Gov. Kate Brown on Thursday, March 12, [detailed new limits](#) on large gatherings, tighter restrictions on student events and strong recommendations to employers to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Oregon.

Gov. Kate Brown on March 12 detailed limits on large gatherings in response to COVID-19

The action comes a day after the Oregon Health Authority completed projections of viral transmission that suggest as many as 150 to 250 people likely have the disease, even though Oregon had only [identified 24 individuals](#) as of March 12.

And without more steps to slow the spread, an estimated 75,000 Oregonians could contract the virus by May 15.

“We find ourselves in an unprecedented public health crisis: a rapidly evolving global pandemic. Most of us have never experienced anything like this. What is clear today is that we must take immediate action to stem the spread of COVID-19, coronavirus, in our communities,” Brown said. “Our strategy now in Oregon is one of shifting away from containing isolated cases of COVID-19. Now we are focused on preventing the worst impacts of a mass outbreak from coming to pass. We must act now to protect those most vulnerable.”

Brown appeared Thursday morning at the Oregon Health Authority alongside Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury, the rest of the County Board of Commissioners, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler, Gresham Mayor Shane Bemis, state Sen. Lew Frederick, Oregon State Health Officer Dr. Dean Sidelinger, and Dr. Jennifer Vines, lead health officer for the Tri-County region.

Chair Kafoury announced she signed [a declaration of emergency](#) Wednesday, March 11. Mayor Wheeler said he followed suit with a city declaration Thursday morning.

Brown's statewide order was developed with input from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, local public health experts, epidemiologists, and health professionals. They include:

[Large gatherings](#): All gatherings of more than 250 people must be canceled statewide, effective immediately, for four weeks, until April 8. A gathering is defined as any event in a space in which appropriate social distancing of at least three feet cannot be maintained.

Schools: Strengthening state guidance issued earlier this week, Brown said all non-essential school-associated gatherings and group activities should be canceled. Those include group parent meetings, field trips and sporting events.

[Workplace](#): Recommended distancing measures include increased physical space between employees in offices and worksites, limited in-person meetings, limited travel, and staggered work schedules where possible.

[Long-Term Care and Assisted Living](#): Strict limitations remain in place. Those include mandatory screenings, limits on community outings, and restrictions on staff and visitors.

Social Distancing

Dr. Vines, lead health officer for the Portland metro counties, worked closely with the Oregon Health Authority and Gov. Brown to develop the social distancing guidance.

Regional lead health officer Dr. Jennifer Vines speaks about social distancing and COVID-19

"I have no illusions about the bitter pill this is for our communities," Vines said. "Education is important, business opportunities are important, social connections are important. And unfortunately, we have to look ahead at what is happening in Washington and Italy, and we have to use the public health tool of social

distancing as the best way, in our opinion, to try to slow the spread of this virus in the community.

“I want to acknowledge that this situation has moved at warp speed, and public health has been keeping up as best we can, understanding that lives are on the line, and so are livelihoods,” she said. “As we think about a virus coming through our community — it’s already here. There is nobody immune to this virus. There is no vaccine. There is no treatment.”

State of Emergency

In Multnomah County, Chair Kafoury signed a declaration of emergency Wednesday, allowing the County to:

- Request assistance from the State
- Suspend purchasing rules to quickly procure necessary goods and services
- Suspend and modify personnel rules and administrative procedures to respond to a dynamic situation
- Direct County officers and employees to perform or facilitate emergency services

The County stood up its emergency operations Jan. 28, a week after the United States saw its first case of COVID-19, in Washington State. Since then, a team of seven nurses and epidemiologists in the County’s Communicable Disease Services has responded to 355 calls from providers and concerned community members, monitored individuals potentially exposed to the virus, and conducted case contact investigations.

The County launched its emergency operations center Feb. 28, where more than 100 County employees and subject matter experts took shifts to prepare for and respond to the outbreak.

“And that was all before we had a single case” in a Multnomah County resident, Kafoury said Thursday. “Multnomah County’s declaration of emergency gives us the flexibility to sustain what we’re doing now and face what may come in this unprecedented outbreak.”

The County is home to the state’s largest concert and event venues, popular clubs and restaurants, a large port and Oregon’s largest airport.

Chair Deborah Kafoury, right, signs a declaration of emergency in response to COVID-19 alongside Public Health Director Rachael Banks.

“The Metro area is particularly vulnerable to a virus that feeds on people coming together,” she said. “We also have the largest number of unhoused people in the state, the largest number of shelters in the state. And we know these neighbors are at particular risk because they are older and sicker than the general population.”

The County, in partnership with service providers and the City of Portland, worked for weeks to create new strategies — and invest additional resources — to limit the spread of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness.

Public Health shared guidance with shelter providers on how to determine which guests should wear masks and how to redesign sleeping spaces. Public Health also crafted tailored recommendations, along with basic prevention and medical care advice, for people without shelter.

The Joint Office of Homeless Services has shared masks and other gear with shelters. And on March 11, the office also launched a five-day outreach push, with more than a dozen agencies, to cover the County and bring supplies and information cards to as many as 2,000 people.

To maintain overall shelter capacity, the Joint Office will keep winter shelters open instead of closing them as scheduled. The Joint Office also has allowed shelter providers to expand their use of motel vouchers and granted outreach teams the power to obtain additional survival gear for those who are unsheltered.

At the City of Portland, officials on Wednesday, March 11, began installing additional stand-alone handwashing stations and portable toilets with handwashing stations, with more handwashing stations on the way.

“All of us here are working to make sure your health and safety are protected,” said Mayor Wheeler. “That is our number one priority.”

Mayor Wheeler said his declaration of emergency gives the city authority to more aggressively confront the virus.

The water bureau has suspended water disconnections to ensure everyone has access to clean water even if they must stay home or if they can’t work for a period of time.

And the city is implementing social distancing measures among employees. It will postpone nonessential meetings, conferences and travel, and it is encouraging employees who are older or have underlying health conditions to stay home.

A member of the media asked at what point state and local authorities would strengthen their recommendations on social distancing to include school closures

or other stringent measures.

That's a difficult decision, Dr. Vines said.

"If we start seeing crowded emergency departments and full intensive care units, by then it's too late for these social distancing measures to have much impact," she said.

Vines has been working with state and local health officials to weigh the interests of public health with economic health, social health and rich educational opportunities. What would it mean for the healthcare workforce? What would it mean for families? Would people still be able to work and pay their rent and buy groceries?

"A lot of great people are working on this right now, to try and understand the implications," she said. "These are, as you are understanding, incredibly complex questions."

Testing

The Oregon Health Authority also announced steps to expand access to COVID-19 testing. State epidemiologists have updated their guidelines for COVID-19 testing to emphasize that outpatient clinicians can order a test for the virus from a commercial laboratory, at their discretion, without OHA authorization.

In addition, the procedure for collecting a COVID-19 sample is no longer classified as a high-risk, airborne process, requiring N95 masks. Under the new recommendations, health care providers will be required only to wear regular masks, gowns, gloves, and eye protection, making the procedure for safely collecting samples simpler to administer for health care workers and easier to obtain for patients.

Finally, state health officials announced that they have agreements with five hospital systems to conduct COVID-19 testing. State health officials and hospital administrators urged anyone considering a COVID-19 test to consult with your health care provider before seeking a test at a local clinic or hospital.



Novel Coronavirus COVID-19

A new virus that began in December 2019 has spread to the United States. In late February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Americans should prepare for COVID-19.

Site

Multnomah County Building

Multnomah County Situation Reports on COVID-19

Regular situation reports on local actions to respond to novel coronavirus COVID-2019.

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Public health alert logo

Public Health Alerts

Warnings, alerts and information for medical providers on illness and infection in the Portland metro region

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