TMA Comments Regarding Efforts to Reopen Tennessee’s Economy
April 19, 2020

The physicians of Tennessee as represented by the Tennessee Medical Association appreciate your willingness to allow us to share some recommendations on gradually reopening our economy from a medical perspective. While the COVID-19 pandemic represents an uncertain situation and all are making assumptions, we would suggest the following plan to gradually open to prevent sudden rises in cases that would threaten our thus far successful efforts to limit the spread and severity of this virus in Tennessee.

First, we recommend a county by county approach based on the average number of new cases per day per 100,000 population. While a state-wide or regional approach might seem more attractive, this would not allow for hot spots that will certainly arise. Opening and closing at a county level will allow more flexibility going forward and should limit spread more effectively.

Second, we agree with opening in stages as proposed by President Trump in his Guidelines for Opening Up America Again with modifications as discussed below.

Instead of trends of decreased new cases or percent positive tests which do not account for the prevalence of active infections in the community, we recommend the initial Gating Criteria for opening a county be 1/100,000 new cases per day averaged over the immediately preceding 7 days. This may seem like a fairly arbitrary number, but it is easy to calculate and responds to the point when states began to close their economies; Tennessee surpassed this threshold on March 23rd last month.

We agree with satisfying the other Gating Criteria for symptoms and hospitals. We agree with the Core State Preparedness Responsibilities concerning robust Testing and Contact Tracing, Healthcare System Capacity, and Plans to protect workers and advise continued social distancing and masking. We also agree with monitoring and mitigating outbreaks that develop by maintaining a Phase or returning to an earlier Phase depending on severity.

We recommend a Phase Zero prior to Phase One which would correspond to our current situation with your Safer at Home order but allowing non-essential businesses to open with adequate social distancing. If a county keeps less than 1/100,000 new cases per day averaged over the immediately preceding 7 days by May 1st, then that county would be able to advance to Phase One. As of April 18th, Tennessee would have 46 counties that would currently meet this criterion to advance (including Knox and Hamilton counties).

We recommend a minimum of 14 days for each Phase prior to proceeding to the next Phase to allow for determination of success or failure in controlling new case rates during that Phase. If a county maintains less than 1/100,000 new cases per day averaged over 7 days after the minimum 14 days in a Phase, then it could advance to the next Phase.
If the county’s new cases rise to over 2/100,000 over 7 days after entering a Phase, then we recommend that county regress to the prior Phase for 14 days. For counties with very low populations where 1 new case over 7 days would result in over 2/100,000 new cases per day (counties with less than 7,143 population), we would suggest 2 new cases over 7 days prior to regression to the prior Phase.

If over 80% of counties that initially enter Phase One are successful at advancing to Phase Two after 14 days by keeping less than 1/100,000 new cases per day then perhaps the Gating Criteria recommendation might be relaxed to 1/50,000. If in higher Phases, more counties have to regress due to case rates rising over 2/100,000 new cases per day, the Gating Criteria for Phase Two and Phase Three may have to be more stringent at either 1/200,000 new cases per day or even fewer.

As counties enter Phase Two or Phase Three, then consideration could be given to advancing on a regional (for Phase Two) or statewide (for Phase Three) basis, with isolated regression of individual counties if the need arises with increased number of cases.

In terms of physical distancing protocols in the Guidelines, we recommend defining strict physical distancing (Phase One) at less than 1 person per 144 square feet, moderate physical distancing (Phase Two) at less than 1 person per 72 square feet, and limited physical distancing (Phase Three) at less than 1 person per 36 square feet.

We believe this measured, staged approach at gradually opening the State of Tennessee by counties will be more likely to prevent significant increases in COVID-19 cases which would result in more serious closures as we have experienced the past 6 weeks. As other mitigating factors arise such as significant amounts of coronavirus immunity on antibody testing, improved treatments to prevent or treat serious complications, and more extensive testing and tracking of cases arise, these recommendations could be adjusted.

In addition to this guidance from a medical perspective on gradually relaxing social distancing and opening businesses and activities, we would also ask you to consider Executive Orders for physicians and hospitals regarding protection from medical liability during this crisis and financial support for independent physician practices while we do our part to restrict elective surgeries and keep patients out of our offices.

Together we will defeat this virus. Thank you for your leadership thus far in issuing the Stay at Home and other Executive Orders. We appreciate working with you as medical professionals and your willingness to consider our recommendations to gradually transition toward normalcy as we continue to suppress the spread of this deadly illness.

Sincerely,

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