



CORONAVIRUS

# EXPLAINER

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## Reopening and Rebuilding a More Resilient Nation

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### Background

After weeks under stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders, the Trump Administration and governors in more than half of the states are announcing plans to reopen their economies. Meanwhile, coronavirus infections continue to increase, with an average of 24,079 new infections per day and 81,805 total deaths as of May 12, 2020.<sup>1</sup> Public health officials warn that opening too early or failing to implement protective measures could trigger another wave of infection. It is clear that any responsible approach to reopening should have two main components: 1) evidence-based measures to safeguard the public health; and 2) financial relief through the duration of the crisis for employees and employers so they don't have to return to business as usual before it's safe. At the moment, neither of these components are in place.

This *Explainer* discusses the public health measures that must be in place before reopening, including safety and health protections on the job, mass testing, contact tracing, and the need to provide guaranteed healthcare to all who need it during this crisis. It also addresses the need for basic income supports like paycheck guarantees and expanded unemployment insurance benefits to provide the economic relief to families that will allow states to reopen safely and carefully, and to avoid feeling pressured to do so too soon.

### The Fevered Pitch to Reopen No Matter the Cost

Despite countless signs showing that the coronavirus pandemic is far from over, the push to reopen quickly is coming from the highest levels. In response to a recent question about lives being lost if we reopen the country now, President Trump answered, "Will some people be affected? Yes. Will some people be affected badly? Yes. But we have to get our country open and we have to get it open soon."<sup>2</sup> Near the peak of the first wave of the crisis, Carolyn Goodman, the mayor of Las Vegas, infamously suggested that Las Vegas could be a 'control group' and return to work before the rest of the country. Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick said, "There are more important things than living," in response to questions about weighing the lives of those infected with COVID-19 and the health of the economy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu>.

<sup>2</sup> World News Tonight. "Trump to ABC's David Muir: 'Possible there will be some' COVID-19 deaths as country reopens." ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-abcs-david-muir-covid-19-deaths-country/story?id=70515537>

<sup>3</sup> Justine Coleman. "Texas Lt. governor on reopening state: 'There are more important things than living'." *The Hill*. April 21, 2020. <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/493879-texas-lt-governor-on-reopening-state-there-are-more-important-things>

Our broken economy and broken healthcare system have made a very bad situation so much worse. Contrary to the statements of these elected officials, the only way forward that protects our economy and our people is to reverse course on our nation's chronic disinvestment in our healthcare system and in the financial security of all but the wealthiest. Forty percent of families today would struggle to cover a \$400 emergency expense<sup>4</sup> and 27.9 million were uninsured in 2018<sup>5</sup>. That number has risen dramatically in the past two months as people lost jobs in the current downturn. Both of these factors make it appear to many workers that returning to work in the midst of a pandemic, even if it means risking their lives, is their only option.

It doesn't have to be this way. Congress can make robust investments now to provide families and businesses with the financial resources to stay out of harm's way until it's safe to return to work. This solution is best for the economy and for people. The most likely scenarios point to additional, more intense waves of COVID-19 outbreaks if people return to work too soon.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, plans to reopen can be guided by the best evidence-based strategies for minimizing or intensifying waves of reinfection, including mass testing, contact tracing, and isolation, as well as guaranteeing health care to those who need it. Democratic lawmakers have proposed plans to make public investments in these measures, as well as investments in providing financial relief to families until it's safe to return to work. The American public agrees. Recent polling indicates that many Americans remain wary of returning to work before it's safe.<sup>7</sup>

## International Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Other nations' responses to this crisis — both their successes and failures — clearly demonstrate the dangers of a cavalier approach to reopening and the need to double down on our investments in public health and income support. Evidence from other countries proves that a robust testing and contact tracing program must be in place in order to reopen with minimal new infections and deaths from COVID-19.

Quickly recognizing the dangers posed by the coronavirus disease, South Korea developed a system to test an average of 12,000 people per day and instituted an expansive contact tracing program using mobile technology in the earliest days of the pandemic. Contact tracing includes identifying individuals infected with COVID-19, educating them on isolation procedures, mapping and monitoring the network of individuals with whom an infected

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<sup>4</sup>Report on the Economic Well Being of Households in 2018. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. May, 2019.

<https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2019-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2018-dealing-with-unexpected-expenses.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Tolbert, Kendal Orgera, Natalie Singer, and Anthony Damico. "Key Facts about the Uninsured Population". Kaiser Family Foundation. December 2019.

<https://www.kff.org/uninsured/issue-brief/key-facts-about-the-uninsured-population/>. Recent research by the Economic Policy Institute indicates that an additional 12.7 million people have lost their health care cover since the crisis began. See Bivens, Zipperer

<https://www.epi.org/blog/12-7-million-workers-have-likely-lost-employer-provided-health-insurance-since-the-coronavirus-shock-began/>

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Begley. "COVID-19's Future: Recurring Small Outbreaks, A Monster Wave, or a Persistent Crisis." STAT. May 1, 2020. <https://www.statnews.com/2020/05/01/three-potential-futures-for-covid-19>

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Russonello. "The Government Is Ready to Reopen. Its Citizens Aren't, Polls Show." *The New York Times*. May 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/us/politics/coronavirus-reopening-polls.html>

person has been in close contact (typically 6 feet or less for more than a few minutes at a time), and advising testing or isolation/quarantine as appropriate.

The Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention sent targeted alerts letting the public know where infected people had been, based on cell phone data and mobile apps.. These policies successfully “flattened the COVID-19 curve” in just 20 days.<sup>8</sup> However, the leaders of South Korea did attempt to return to business as usual too quickly, which they acknowledged has contributed to a second wave of the outbreak. This second wave has seen an uptick in the infection rate due to eased restrictions, and the nation is again closing nightclubs and bars and increasing contact tracing efforts.<sup>9</sup>

In an effort to curb mortality rates related to COVID-19, Germany recently began an aggressive testing program of 350,000 tests per week. Not only do German state health agencies test those who exhibit symptoms, they also test asymptomatic individuals who have been at or near events in which outbreaks have occurred. This proved successful, but after easing restrictions, Germany has recently seen an uptick in COVID-19 cases. In early May, the infection rate crept up, but has remained fewer than 1000 infections a day, a threshold that would indicate potential for a more serious outbreak.<sup>10</sup> To hold infection rates in check, the German government is currently considering measures to tighten its lockdown.<sup>11</sup>

With only 102 cases of COVID-19 as of March 23, New Zealand instituted a full lockdown as part of its elimination strategy. Its government also tested over 150,000 people and conducted contact tracing with those who tested positive. Just last week, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced New Zealand’s first day with no new cases reported.<sup>12</sup>

## Opening Up America Again: The Administration’s Response

While there is still a lack of federal coordination around the coronavirus outbreak, the Trump Administration released a set of guidelines for phased reopenings at the state level.

Before beginning to reopen, states should see a downward trajectory in COVID-19 and other flu-like cases for 14 days as well as increased hospital capacity and testing for healthcare workers. Phase 1 encourages continued social distancing, bans large gatherings, instructs vulnerable individuals to remain sheltered in place, encourages teleworking, and keeps bars and schools closed. Phase 2 eases the restrictions on large gatherings, allows non-essential travel, and reopens schools, but teleworking is still encouraged. Phase 3 suggests almost a full

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<sup>8</sup> UNDP Seoul Policy Center on Flattening the Curve on COVID-19.

[http://www.undp.org/content/seoul\\_policy\\_center/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/flattening-the-curve-on-covid-19.html](http://www.undp.org/content/seoul_policy_center/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/flattening-the-curve-on-covid-19.html)

<sup>9</sup> Ramy Inocencio. “Coronavirus Flare Ups in China and South Korea Prompt New Fears of a Second Wave. CBS News. May 13, 2020.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-in-asia-new-cases-wuhan-china-seoul-south-korea-test-contain-covid-to-day-2020-05-13/>

<sup>10</sup> David Shuckman. “Coronavirus: Germany Not Alarmed by Infection Rate Rise.” BBC. May 12, 2020.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52632369>

<sup>11</sup> Mia Jankowicz. “Germany’s daily coronavirus case count has nearly tripled as regions consider an ‘emergency brake’ to reinstate harsher lockdowns.” Business Insider. May 12, 2020.

[businessinsider.com/germany-reports-933-new-coronavirus-cases-considers-emergency-brake-2020-5](https://www.businessinsider.com/germany-reports-933-new-coronavirus-cases-considers-emergency-brake-2020-5)

<sup>12</sup> Sophie Cousins. “New Zealand Eliminates COVID-19.” *The Lancet*. May, 9, 2020.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31097-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31097-7/fulltext)

return to normal with vulnerable individuals practicing social distancing and large venues reopening with limited social distancing protocols.<sup>13</sup> While the plan calls for robust testing, there is little in the way of specific federal guidance for testing capacity or thresholds.

However, our national testing capacity remains woefully inadequate, and our limited testing capacity is not equally distributed. During a May 12, 2020 Senate HELP committee hearing, Sen. Lamar Alexander remarked, “What our country has done so far in testing is impressive but not nearly enough.”<sup>14</sup> Even that statement may be misleading. While the US has tested more people than most other nations, we have a larger population and more widespread cases. In terms of testing per 1,000 people, we lag behind Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Germany and Canada at 26 tests per thousand people. By current estimates the United States ranks between 22nd and 30th in the world in terms of COVID-19 tests per capita.<sup>15</sup> This translates to an average of 276,000 tests a day during the week of May 3rd, roughly half the minimum of 500,000 tests experts suggest are needed to control the pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

The Administration has nevertheless increasingly urged governors to move forward and ease restrictions relating to the lockdown. Despite the pressure, Dr. Anthony Fauci of the White House Coronavirus Task Force and other public health experts have urged caution, stating, “If we skip over the checkpoints in the guidelines to ‘Open America Again,’ then we risk the danger of multiple outbreaks throughout the country. This will not only result in needless suffering and death, but would actually set us back on our quest to return to normal.”<sup>17</sup>

## Safeguarding Public Health and Rebuilding the Economy through Testing and Contact Tracing

Echoing Dr. Fauci’s concerns about a premature reopening, and recognizing the need for a stronger public health standard for reopening, several states, organizations, and elected leaders have set forth their own plans to protect those who return to their jobs and the communities in which they work and live..

The AFL-CIO stresses the importance of worker voice and sound science in any reopening plan, calling for increased testing, social distancing and isolation, strong health and safety standards for frontline and essential workers, and protection from potential retaliation by their employers.<sup>18</sup> Safe working conditions would require an emergency OSHA standard, adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), training for employees, staggered shifts, and other changes to minimize the opportunity to spread the virus in the workplace. Emphasizing that schools must safely reopen before many parents can return to work, the American Federation of Teachers

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<sup>13</sup> Guidelines: Opening America Again. April 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

<sup>14</sup> Aaron Blake. “5 Takeaways from Anthony Fauci’s and other health officials’ testimony.” *The Washington Post*. May 12, 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/12/3-early-takeaways-anthony-faucis-health-officials-testimony/>

<sup>15</sup> Holly Yan, “Trump says the US leads the world in testing. But it’s far behind in testing per capita, studies show.” CNN, May 12, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/12/health/us-coronavirus-testing-per-capita/index.html>

<sup>16</sup> German Lopez. “Trump’s White House Banner Claims ‘America Leads the World in Testing.’ That’s Wrong.” Vox.com. May 12, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/11/21255128/coronavirus-testing-trump-white-house-briefing>

<sup>17</sup> Coronavirus Live Updates: Fauci to Warn of ‘Needless Suffering and Death’ if States Reopen Too Soon. New York Times. May 12, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/12/us/coronavirus-updates.html>

<sup>18</sup> AFL-CIO. “Safety First: Working People’s Plan for Reopening the Economy the Right Way.” [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tcR0FvixMGI0vSzxBIDL\\_Q8gHM-U0Bdl/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tcR0FvixMGI0vSzxBIDL_Q8gHM-U0Bdl/view)

released guidance on ending lockdowns and limiting the further transmission of COVID-19 that includes continued social distancing, rigorous testing and contact tracing, and “involving workers, unions, parents and communities in all planning”.<sup>19</sup> The Rockefeller Foundation put forth a plan to ramp up to 30 million tests a week. This would be supported by a COVID-19 health corps and an open-source data network.<sup>20</sup>

The state of Massachusetts announced an expanded testing and contact tracing program that will hire and train an additional 1,000 people. These contact tracers will map and contact all individuals who test positive for COVID-19 and counsel them on treatment options and isolation procedures. The tracers will then reach out to everyone with whom the infected person has been in close contact and counsel them in a similar fashion.<sup>21</sup> Other states are launching similar programs, but some, such as Michigan, may squander the opportunity to create good jobs while serving the public good. The Michigan plan seeks to establish a volunteer tracing corps rather than hiring and training a full time workforce.<sup>22</sup>

The Reopen America Act of 2020 (H.R. 6525) sponsored by Reps. Raskin, Shalala, Jeffries, Eshoo, and Welch, would provide a much-needed and innovative framework for testing, contact tracing and isolation.<sup>23</sup> The bill would set two science-based conditions for reopening: 1) infection rates have to drop sufficiently to ‘allow hospitals to properly care for the infected population’ and 2) the likelihood of one individual infecting another would have to be less than one-to-one. The states — and the District of Columbia — would then have to submit plans for reopening to the Department of Health and Human Services for approval and funding if necessary. Supplying funding to states to reopen properly is critically important given the need for new capacity for testing, contact tracing, the development and implementation of public health guidance for gathering in public spaces, and more.

Rep. Andy Levin and Sen. Elizabeth Warren are calling for the creation of a federal containment corps to track infections. Under this proposal, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would have 30 days to plan a program that would hire, train, and employ individuals to identify and trace those infected with COVID-19. The plan would require the CDC to fund local health departments and require the Department of Labor to fund workplace agencies to publicize the program and ensure that the unemployed are aware of the program and related employment opportunities.

## Guaranteeing Paychecks, Healthcare, and Income Support

In addition to safety and health protections on the job, mass testing, and contact tracing, we must implement support to help working people and businesses weather this crisis. First, we

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<sup>19</sup> American Federation of Teachers. “A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities.” May, 2020. [https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/covid19\\_reopen-america-schools.pdf](https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/covid19_reopen-america-schools.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> The Rockefeller Foundation. “National COVID-19 Testing Action Plan.” April 21, 2020 [https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TheRockefellerFoundation\\_WhitePaper\\_Covid19\\_4\\_22\\_2020.pdf](https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TheRockefellerFoundation_WhitePaper_Covid19_4_22_2020.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Martha Bebinger. “Why Charlie Baker Thinks ‘Contact Tracing’ Might Help Mass Slow - or Stop - COVID-19.” WBUR. April 3, 2020. <https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/04/03/contact-tracing-coronavirus-massachusetts-baker>

<sup>22</sup> Abdul El-Sayed. “Why Michigan’s Contact Tracing Plan Falls Short.” *The Detroit Free Press*. May 11, 2020. <https://www.freep.com/story/opinion/contributors/2020/05/11/why-michigans-contact-tracing-plan-falls-short-opinion/3105930001/>

<sup>23</sup> Scott Wong. “Democrats Roll Out National Plan to Reopen America.” *The Hill*. April 24, 2020. <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/494524-democrats-roll-out-national-plan-to-reopen-america>

must provide guaranteed healthcare to all who need it. Expanding Medicare to cover those who have lost their jobs and employer-based healthcare due to the crisis would lead to better health outcomes for all of us. Everyone would be able to seek treatment and avoid spreading the virus if they become ill.

Second, we must invest in income supports that last for the duration of this crisis. Unless people have money in their pockets to meet their basic needs, many will feel forced to return to work before it's safe. And, unless businesses that are suffering severe revenue losses in this pandemic through no fault of their own receive financial support to keep workers on payroll, businesses may also feel forced to open their doors before it's prudent or lay off their workers. Congress must make serious investments in providing financial relief to families to avoid future waves of reinfection.

One-time payments won't do nearly enough to help families weather this crisis. Programs that keep workers attached to their job so that they continue to receive their benefits and pay — like the Paycheck Guarantee Act and an expanded federal work-sharing program — would keep families afloat, make it easier for businesses to ramp up between waves, and help rebuild our economy as soon as the crisis has passed. Rental and home mortgage relief, expanded food assistance, expanded child care assistance, and direct cash assistance are other ways to get help directly to the families who need it most. Income supports to families including expanded unemployment insurance or other benefits must not be tied to an arbitrary end date, but instead should rely on the most relevant economic indicators as triggers.

## Conclusion

The nation has reached a crucial decision point. Though some have portrayed reopening as a tradeoff between the economy and saving lives, it is not. This virus has presented us with many unknowns, but the one constant has been that underestimating it carries a very high price. We need significant public investments in widespread testing to ensure that those who are infected can isolate while seeking treatment, and contact tracing to find, test, and treat anyone that an infected person has potentially exposed to the virus. Once we flatten the curve and reduce the rate of new infections, we must continue to monitor, test, and rely on evidence-based public health best practices to guide when and how we reopen.

At the same time that we are facing our greatest public health crisis in over a century, we are facing the greatest economic crisis we have seen since the Great Depression. Now, as we did then, we must embrace innovative policies that get people back to work, provide lasting income support and debt relief, and keep as many people as possible attached to their jobs until economic conditions improve. Now is not the time for a reckless, timid, or piecemeal approach. We need bold, progressive policies that safeguard the public, and help rebuild a more just, equitable, and resilient nation.