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FSC - Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Insider

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Texas State Sen. Bryan Hughes is the Chair of the Committees on State Affairs and on Administration and leads this effort to provide accurate information to the public. Additional information is compiled from FSC medical professionals working on the front line to treat and prevent COVID-19. Find additional resources at <http://fscllp.com/fsc-covid-19-resources/>, including links to all 50 states' primary references on COVID-19 and state-by-state news updated daily.

Political Update

Hope is growing that much of the US may have reached the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Myriad variables come into play, of course, but there is encouragement that the growth of the virus is slowing. Total cases worldwide on Monday night topped 1.9M, with US cases over 581,000. Deaths in the US reached 23,000 as Wyoming, the only state without a reported COVID-19 death, saw its first. But in terms of growth, on Monday around 1,500 new US deaths from COVID-19 were reported. While tragic, this number was well below last week when there were on average 2,000 deaths in each 24-hour period.

As a growing number of economists and business leaders warn of the increasingly dire consequences to the economy, and more Americans grow frustrated with limitations on their daily lives, news of the virus's slowing growth has accelerated discussions about how and when Americans can get back to work. Even the cautious Dr. Anthony Fauci, whose polls suggest is also one of the most trusted voices on the pandemic, stated Sunday that he believes parts of the country could begin a "rolling reentry" by the beginning of May.

Dr. Fauci and others have stressed that a too-big-too-soon reopening could cause a rebound of the virus, potentially worse than the initial attack.

And there is an argument that by moving prematurely, America could experience the worst of all worlds: a heavy toll from the virus in addition to the crushing economic cost of the measures already put in place. The country has borne and will continue to bear a heavy economic burden from the social distancing and business closures. But these actions have succeeded in slowing the spread of the virus. If the country too soon returns to the *status quo ante virus*, and COVID-19 ravages the population as had been initially feared, the country would suffer the financial burden of the social distancing and business closures, but not receive the benefit of a reduced virus spread.

In other words, the argument goes, having already incurred the extreme costs of the restrictions on the economy, the country should not now abandon the limitations too soon and thus give up whatever benefits these measures have yielded in terms of slowing the virus's spread.

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So as leaders continue to seek the elusive balance among competing policy goals, they must determine how long we must keep social distancing and business limitations in place in order to retain the health benefits gained by the restrictions.

There is broad agreement that the *sine qua non* to a responsible return to work plan will be adequate testing. As the Surgeon General expressed two weeks ago and as many more have stated since, once there is sufficient testing to determine the hot spots and identify those that are sick, a targeted and scaled reopening of the country will make more sense.

President Trump has long advocated a sooner rather than later return to work. And a rapidly growing number of Governors are expressing their eagerness to at least start the discussion.

In hardest-hit New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo believes that the worst is over, so long as residents continue to work to stem the spread. Though more than 10,000 New Yorkers have died – almost half the country's total – the numbers have begun to level off. On Sunday, New York reported 671 deaths, down from 758 on Saturday.

To begin developing a plan for their region, Cuomo joined with the Governors of New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Rhode Island in creating a working group of public health, economic and government officials from each state. These states together have reported over 325,000 cases (over half the US total) and nearly 14,400 deaths (over 60% of US fatalities). Though stopping short of announcing a schedule for a regional return to work, the Governors' announcement was a significant step in that direction.

Similarly, the states of California, Oregon, and Washington will reveal their plan for the easing of restrictions as well as targeted measures to continue to slow the spread of COVID-19 this week. California Governor Gavin Newsom announced that the governors of the three states had worked closely last year in battling forest fires in the region, and that they have been closely collaborating through the pandemic in recent months.

The President this week is set to announce his Opening Our Country Task Force made up of business and medical experts. He has said that the decision as to when and how to return America to work is the most difficult he has faced.

In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott will announce this week his plan for a reopening of the state. The Governor has thus far moved cautiously and with an eye to local communities' diverse needs and challenges, and it is anticipated that his plan for getting Texas back to work will have a similar feel. The Governor stressed that the plan will focus on protecting lives while restoring livelihoods.

On Monday, Governor Abbott joined Goldman Sachs President John Waldron to announce a \$50M program to help Texas small businesses affected by COVID-19.

On April 12, the Governor extended his Disaster Declaration for all Texas counties. "By extending my Disaster Declaration, we are ensuring the state of Texas continues to have adequate resources and capabilities to support our communities and protect public health," said Governor Abbott. "I urge all Texans

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to continue practicing social distancing and abide by the guidelines laid out by the CDC and my Executive Orders to slow the spread of COVID-19."

The Governor also further eased restrictions to allow for more medical providers in the event of a COVID-19 surge. Medical residents in a surgery residency program will now be permitted to assist in an Emergency Department in a surge. This is the latest in a series of administrative changes the Governor has implemented under his emergency powers to allow for more health care practitioners.

Governor Abbott also announced a new system to assist medical personnel and other essential workers with child-care. The Texas Frontline Child Care Task Force is headed by Elaine Mendoza of the Supply Chain Strike Force and includes the Texas Workforce Commission, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

And to further expand healthcare capacity, the Governor temporarily waived a series of regulations on telehealth. A smart phone or any audio-visual, real-time, or two-way interactive communication system qualify as a telecommunications technology that can be used to provide certain telehealth services. These waivers apply to speech-language pathologists and audiologists, behavior analysts, hearing instrument fitters and dispensers, and dyslexia therapists and practitioners.

To help Texans safely perform necessary business transactions, Governor Abbott suspended certain statutes concerning appearance before a notary public to execute a self-proved will, a durable power of attorney, a medical power of attorney, a directive to physician, or an oath of an executor, administrator, or guardian. These changes will temporarily allow for appearance before a notary public via videoconference, avoiding the need for in-person contact during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As record breaking numbers of Texans have applied for unemployment insurance, frustration has mounted over the lack of capacity on the state's website and telephone systems. The state has responded by shifting hundreds of employees and significant resources to boost capacity and help Texans make their claims. More reinforcements will arrive this week as volunteers from the Texas Senate – made up of Senators as well as members of their staffs – have received training to begin assisting Texans with their unemployment claims.

The oil and gas industry in Texas received some welcome news as oil producing nations agreed to limit production. Saudi Arabia's price war with Russia drove down oil prices even before the effects of the COVID-19 hit. As air travel skidded almost to a halt and economic activity slowed dramatically due to COVID-19, demand for oil has plunged. The deal was almost scuttled by opposition from Mexico, but pressure on OPEC from President Trump helped to rescue the pact.

The agreed cuts of almost 10M barrels/day are by far the largest ever by OPEC. This is still less than the amount by which demand has been reduced by the pandemic, but experts agree it should eventually help to stabilize the market.

Austria, Denmark, and the Czech Republic began lifting restrictions this week. Observers in the US are hopeful that these countries' experience will be instructive here.

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For residents of a city in Texas, the Mayor and City Council have the responsibility and authority to respond to health concerns in the City. For residents outside the city limits, the County Judge and Commissioners' Court fulfill this role.

Each region of Texas also has a local Public Health Entity that coordinates with the Department of State Health Services and is specifically tasked with helping address the virus. Contact info for local Public Health Entities is here:

<https://www.dshs.texas.gov/regions/2019-nCoV-Local-Health-Entities/>

Latest Counts

- As of April 13, 2020, there are 13,906 COVID-19 cases reported in 178 Texas counties. 1,176 of these patients are hospitalized.
- There have been 287 deaths and it is estimated that 2,269 Texans have recovered.
- 133,226 Texans have now been tested for the virus.

The Texas Department of State Health Services updates official counts before noon each day. The Department has established a helpful COVID-19 dashboard:

<https://txdshs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/ed483ecd702b4298ab01e8b9cafc8b83>

Economic Impact Payments

Qualifying Americans will start to receive Economic Impact Payments under the CARES Act. For security reasons, **the IRS plans to mail a letter about the economic impact payment to the taxpayer's last known address within 15 days after the payment is paid.** The letter will provide information on how the payment was made and how to report any failure to receive the payment. If a taxpayer is unsure that they are receiving a legitimate letter, the IRS urges taxpayers to immediately visit IRS.gov to protect against scam artists.

The IRS will not call, text you, email you or contact you on social media asking for personal or bank account information. That is a scam.

To get up-to-date information about these payments, including whether you qualify for a payment, go to <https://www.irs.gov/coronavirus/economic-impact-payment-information-center>.

Further, while I am not an accountant or qualified to give tax advice, I remind people to check irs.gov or consult with their tax advisor to determine if their deadline for filing taxes was automatically extended to July 15, 2020.

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