

April 30, 2020

Dear Governor Pritzker:

We applaud your recent loosening of the *Stay At Home* order that will take effect on May 1, but we firmly believe that a one-size-fits-all set of regulations for a state as diverse as Illinois is not practical. We share your concern for the danger COVID-19 poses to Illinois and the nation. Your leadership, guided by medical and public health professionals, has been unwavering, direct and actionable based on science. Illinois' decisive action at the onset of this pandemic has undoubtedly saved lives. However, we write to you to implore you to give consideration to regional factors when developing COVID-19 restrictions on Illinois businesses.

To be clear, this is not a request to allow the full and immediate reopening of the economy to pre-pandemic levels. We share the concern that doing so at this stage would be foolhardy and potentially dangerous. Rather, our request is that the state's reopening plan not be predicated on the success of the Chicago area alone, but by how individual regions are doing relative to established benchmarks. Though we recognize that testing rates in different parts of the state vary, according to IDPH's statistics the five counties¹ represented in this letter have a total of 348 confirmed positive cases as of Wednesday, April 29 among a population of about 740,000. By contrast, Cook County has a population of about 5.2 million people with 34,880 confirmed cases. The prevalence of COVID-19 in Cook County is over fourteen times that of our Central Illinois communities (0.668% of the population vs. 0.047%). Even when the collar counties are added to the Cook County the disproportionate impact is stunning at over ten times the prevalence (0.543% vs. 0.047%). Just as importantly, the I-74 corridor between Peoria and Champaign boasts a robust healthcare community with ICU capacity and other critical services that can ensure a proper response to medical needs.

The difference in these numbers is due to the tremendous differences between our region and the Chicago area. Density matters and is embedded in the very concept of "social distancing." Central Illinois communities do not share the same factors that exacerbate communicable disease transmission like crowded public transportation or densely populated high-rise office buildings. Just as your doctor would prescribe different treatments for different members of your family based on age, gender and other factors, we believe you should prescribe different treatments to the various members of the Illinois family.

We recommend that you allow regional public health officials, working together with local elected and business leadership and in consultation with your team, to craft reopening plans that reflect the situation here. We believe that loosening or tightening stay-at-home rules should be done in concert with increased community testing and tied to science-based, transparent health metrics. Below are a few common sense examples of how Central Illinois might allow life to move towards normalcy while ensuring public health:

- All individuals wear a face covering or mask and maintain social distancing while in public.
- Allow employees to return to commercial offices but restrict being open to the public. Maintain social distancing, hand washing and cleaning protocols.
- Allow all retail shops to open to the public but limit the number of customers at any one time based on square footage. Require masks and gloves for all employees.
- Allow restaurants to resume dine-in services at 50 percent occupancy with proper distancing strictly enforced, mandated masks for employees, requirement for paper menus only and other common sense guidelines outlined by the National Restaurant Association.

¹ Champaign, McLean, Peoria, Tazewell and Woodford

- Allow barbers, hairstylists and other similar professionals to provide service one customer at a time or offer appropriate distancing with no waiting rooms with service providers wearing masks and gloves.

These suggestions are just a sample of what a set of regional diverse stakeholders might develop. Regulations like these and others would be modeled on industry best practices and the guidance of local, state and national public health professionals.

We need to be concerned about the short- and long-term health impacts of economic collapse. Local financial institutions have noted a double-digit decrease in consumer spending (April 2020 to April 2019) and a considerable slowdown in business spending. Sadly, we know that many of our businesses will not emerge from this pandemic intact. This month the U.S. Chamber of Commerce released a poll citing that one in four small businesses said they are two months or less away from closing permanently. One in ten are less than one month away. As downstate communities patiently wait for the numbers to improve in one region of the state, how many Illinois businesses will fail and how many citizens will be facing poverty due to the COVID-19 economic crisis? We already know that the economic impact of the pandemic has disproportionately impacted low-income communities. Studies have linked poverty to poor health outcomes, including a landmark 2016 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that found a dramatic difference of 10 - 15 years in life expectancy between the poorest and richest Americans. We have to have viable employment options so that people can return to work when this is over and after unemployment benefits end. If businesses are shuttered, there will be less of those options.

Furthermore, our municipal and county governments are projecting deficits that are collectively in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Our downstate colleges and universities, which have historically financially protected their communities during economic downturns, are reporting huge financial losses and are making these communities vulnerable in a way Illinois has never known. How will the next pandemic be fought when local public health capacity and front-line responders are decimated by budget cuts? How many Illinoisans will suffer if the social safety net breaks because of lack of funding, either from government or charitable sources?

We do not envy the decisions you must make for Illinois. Our diversity has always been our strength. The current method of combating this pandemic imposes a uniform approach that belies that diversity. We believe downstate communities can make common sense, science-based decisions that will help our state prevail in the fight against COVID-19 and ensure that our economy comes roaring back.

We are not asking you to fight this battle alone. We are in this together. We offer the assistance of any of the Central Illinois Chamber leaders to give you a downstate perspective and to develop a plan that protects the health of our residents while also protecting the health of our economy. We need both for Illinois to thrive.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Mike Estes
Chairman
Champaign County
Chamber of Commerce

Nathan Hinch
Chairman
McLean County
Chamber of Commerce

Joy Ledbetter
Chairwoman
Peoria Area
Chamber of Commerce

Cindy Loos
Chairwoman
Greater Peoria
CEO Council