

Lindsey Leichthammer
President, Vermont Association of Wedding Professionals
Owner, Lindsey Leichthammer Events
100 West Canal Street, #13, Winooski, VT 05404
hello@lindseyleichthammer.com
781.254.2944

April 27th, 2020
Governor Phil Scott
Vermont Governor's Office
109 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05609

RE: COVID-19 - The struggling Vermont wedding industry, and its financial implications for the Vermont economy

Dear Governor Scott,

I want to begin by thanking you for your tireless efforts in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. I applaud the brave and conservative measures that you and your team have taken to “flatten the curve” and to keep Vermonters safe and healthy.

I'm writing to you today to explain the very dynamic issues facing the Vermont wedding industry in the tidal wave of COVID-19, and moreover, what the further financial implications are for the Vermont economy at large. Additionally, I'd like to request the inclusion of our wedding industry “task force,” led by myself (President) and Talena Companion (Treasurer) of the Vermont Association of Wedding Professionals, at the appropriate committee meetings pertaining to reopening the state with particular relevance to large gatherings.

The Vermont wedding industry is comprised of a number of industry categories, from venues, catering and tenting to bands, makeup artists, stationers and everything in between. The Vermont wedding industry contributed \$164 million to the Vermont economy in 2019 (see attached wedding statistic report). This number reflects the amount spent across industry categories, a large portion of which are small businesses, entrepreneurs and family businesses. Of the 5,665 weddings that occurred in the state of Vermont, 46% of those were destination weddings where out-of-state couples and their guests traveled to Vermont for these events. Additionally, the \$164 million figure does not reflect the exponential spending of wedding guests at our airports, accommodations, gas stations, grocery stores, rest stops and so on. This aspect is exceptionally important when thinking about the rebuilding of the Vermont economy, particularly in regard to event size and out-of-state visitors.

The wedding industry's collective voice has been to promote the message of "Postpone, don't cancel," in an effort to retain projected revenue dollars within the state of Vermont, be that in 2020 or 2021. We are dissuading our clients from having online weddings or "micro-weddings" of under 10 guests in favor of keeping their "dream" weddings with large guest counts at a later date, thus keeping those dollars in the hands of Vermont business owners and within Vermont borders.

I want to be clear that I'm not asking the oft-repeated question, "*When can we expect gatherings of more than XX people?*" I am aware -- as are my fellow industry members -- that the short answer to this question is, "We don't know." However, there are very important ways in which the state can provide support and clarity for our industry as we move through the calendar, and those are as follows:

- Including Vermont wedding industry representatives (myself and Talena Companion) in pertinent committee meetings related to opening up the state, with particular relevance to large gatherings, events and weddings. We plan to disseminate this information to our association and to leaders of similar associations and coalitions in the surrounding states in an effort to keep information up to date, factual and consistent. We also plan to report back what those surrounding states are planning within this particular topic.
- Providing authoritative mandates on gathering restrictions, no matter how conservative. This will help greatly in terms of how we can proceed forward with postponements, perhaps in 60- to 90-day windows.
 - The difficulty here is the "gray area" of when exactly couples make their decisions to postpone or cancel. Some couples are fine with "kicking the can" to see how things play out, but others are postponing out of extreme caution or worry, and others still are adamant about retaining their dates and going on with a "business as usual" mindset. Those scenarios each come with their own set of legalities with regard to refunds vs. retention of deposits, final payments and contractual obligations. Providing clearer mandates on large gatherings will ease some contractual disputes between vendors and clients. It will also provide us adequate time to logistically postpone these large events to future dates, with the ultimate goal being to preserve that revenue by preventing clients from canceling completely or resorting to weddings in their home states.

- Having more clear guidelines will also help those industry categories with large perishable inventories (particularly caterers and florists) to plan their purchasing, The fear is that those businesses will be subject to “loss of business” if the gathering mandate updates happen too close to the event dates (i.e. less than 30 days). Business interruption insurance is not covering COVID-19 related incidents, and we want those vendors to purchase their product with confidence (with the added benefit that the majority of that spend is with other Vermont farms and businesses).
- Considering financial relief in some variety to wedding and event industry members. Similar to restaurants (which in many cases would be included in the wedding industry category), our industries will be the last to open up. We'll be expected to endure the longest period of time without work, and the spigot will open the slowest for us, coupled with the likelihood of stringent regulations as we move forward. While I realize there are a vast number of businesses facing economic struggle in the wake of pandemic, there are industries like events and restaurants that will be fighting a longer battle, and we ask for your consideration of this timeline.

Thank you, Governor Scott, for your time and attention to this matter. We look forward to becoming a part of your team to open up and revitalize the Vermont economy, acting alongside you in solidarity, and preserving the livelihood of the Vermont Wedding Industry.

Sincerely,

Lindsey Leichthammer
 President, Vermont Association of Wedding Professionals
 Owner, Lindsey Leichthammer Events

On behalf of the Vermont Association of Wedding Professionals Board of Directors:

*Talena Companion, Owner, Premier Entertainment and Events // Board Treasurer
 Annie Alexander-Kramer, Owner, The Parsonne // Board Secretary
 Michael Lubas, Owner, Vermont Tent Company
 Jayson Munn, Owner, Jayson Munn Design
 Newton Wells, Owner, Peak Entertainment
 Nancy Jeffries-Dwyer, Owner, NJOY Event Planning
 Tracy Stolese, Owner, Shelburne Gift Company
 Nancy Hanes-Ess, Event Director, Inn at Manchester
 Paul Reynolds, Owner, Illume Imaging Studio
 Lorin Holmes, Former Owner of VermontWeddings.com*