



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**ILLINOIS RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION AND OPERATORS STATEWIDE CALL**  
**FOR THE IMMEDIATE REOPENING OF INDOOR DINING**

**CHICAGO** (January 14, 2021) – As the restaurant industry statewide suffers amid continued dining room closures due to COVID-19, the **Illinois Restaurant Association** and restaurant operators around the state are urgently calling upon Governor JB Pritzker to immediately allow for safe and limited indoor dining operations.

The IRA's **Open Indoor Dining. Save Illinois Restaurants!** campaign unites operators and restaurant employees in voicing their concerns directly with state leaders, including unprecedented rates of job loss, storefront closures, and rapidly increasing debt. Restaurateurs, whose businesses have been shut down for indoor service for more than two months, are imploring Governor Pritzker to allow for some indoor dining with extensive safety measures in place during ongoing mitigations.

"Eating and drinking places in Illinois lost 31,000 jobs in November alone," said IRA President and CEO **Sam Toia**. "This is the highest rate of hospitality job loss in the entire country, and three times as many as the next closest state. We are also one of only three states with a complete statewide shutdown of indoor dining. Restaurants are out of time, and they need a more reasonable – and immediate – path forward to save the industry. This is the reckoning."

With 1 in 5 hospitality jobs lost since February 2020, operators have faced heartbreaking decisions and unfathomable outcomes for laid off or furloughed employees struggling to cover basic living expenses.

"2.1 million people in our profession are out of work nationwide," said **Chef Rick Bayless** of Frontera Restaurants, "and restaurant owners have done everything within their means to keep their teams together. They have followed all the guidance and protocols issued by our governor. But to carry on solely with carryout, delivery, meal kits, and mid-winter outdoor dining is simply not enough. Without the capability of some safe indoor dining, our restaurants' long-term prospects are bleak, and we chip away – bit by bit – at the American dream. Not just the dreams our employees, who are among the most vulnerable in our society, but those of everyone contributing to the food supply chain throughout the country."

**Alpana Singh**, renowned wine expert and owner of Evanston's Terra & Vine restaurant, agrees. "We're doing a little bit of everything, down to converting part of our dining room into a wine retail shop, but all of these efforts don't come anywhere close to meeting our pre-COVID-19 numbers. Our business was designed to serve diners, in our restaurant. There's not any combination that can fully replace that vision, and while we need to be pragmatic in restoring volume, we must reintroduce indoor dining in some capacity for our restaurants to survive. And I know we can do so smartly, while protecting the wellbeing of our guests and our teams."

Operators have always been among the most highly-regulated when it comes to health and safety and worked at rapid-fire pace upon COVID-19's onset to implement and enforce enhanced protocols including PPE, social distancing, mask requirements, signage, and more. According to IDPH, restaurants represent 4% of the total COVID-19 outbreak locations since July 1.

“We have followed every guideline to the letter and then some,” said **Karen Conn**, whose Conn’s Hospitality Group operates restaurants, a coffeehouse, microbrewery, and catering business in Springfield. “Keeping people safe is what we do every single day, and as family-owned and operated small operation, I’m ready to be at the table to discuss practical solutions that will allow businesses like mine across central Illinois make it through this crisis.”

**Illinois has been shut down for indoor dining for more than 75 days since October 30** – longer than any other state in the country.

“More than 75 days. And that’s after a previous shut-down earlier in the year and a prolonged period of great unrest in our nation,” said **Cliff Rome**, who owns the beloved Peach’s Restaurant and Rome’s Joy Catering in Chicago’s Bronzeville area. Respected for his culinary contributions and continual investment in his community, he adds, “This isn’t just about keeping our operations afloat. It’s also about our neighbors – our youth, our brothers and sisters in the restaurant industry, our patrons. Restaurants and the people who help them run have the power to change lives and communities for the better. It is imperative that we get people back to work as soon as possible, or we risk of losing all of that progress, and of letting all these people down.”

**Sam Sanchez** – owner of Moe’s Cantina and Old Crow Smokehouse and incoming IRA Board Chairman – has seen the devastating impact of dining room closures on the livelihoods of his own team members. “Prior to the pandemic, my partners and I employed more than 800 employees. Today, we employ 35. That’s **765 unemployed individuals from my business alone** with families to care for, bills to pay, mouths to feed. Many have been unable to secure unemployment benefits. Every day, we receive calls from colleagues asking if they can come back. It’s heartbreaking to see their struggles.

“Restaurants employ more people than any other industry in Illinois,” he added. We know how to operate safely, perhaps more than any other industry. Yet we were the first to be shut down during mitigations and will now be the last to even partially reopen – to the brink of collapse. It is imperative that our state’s leaders take action now. We need to get our teams back to work.”

If the state does not change course, it is estimated that 5,000 or more restaurants will close permanently – eliminating 120,000+ jobs and desolating communities in every corner of the state.

#### **Illinois Restaurant Industry Statistics:**

- Eating and drinking places in IL lost 31,000 jobs in November, the most of any state in the country, and three times as many as the next closest state (*Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics and National Restaurant Association*)
- Illinois is one of three states in the country with a complete statewide shutdown of indoor dining.
- Illinois restaurants have currently been closed for more than 75 days straight
- Illinois restaurants were the first to be shut down during mitigations and will be the last to even partially reopen
- Nationwide, restaurants were forced to cut 372,000 jobs in December, meaning the sector finished 2020 with nearly 2.5 million jobs (or 20%) below pre-COVID-19 levels
- 1 in 5 hospitality jobs in Illinois were lost between February and November 2020, representing 98,700 workers or 21% of the state’s industry
- 86% of restaurant operators have laid off or furloughed employees
- 86% of restaurant operators say it is unlikely that their restaurant will be profitable within the next six months
- 66% of operators say that it is unlikely their restaurant will still be in business in 6 months without an additional relief package from the federal government
- 71% of operators say that their total operational costs are higher than they were prior to COVID-19
- It is estimated that 5,000 or more restaurants will close permanently in Illinois – eliminating 120,000+ jobs

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**About Illinois Restaurant Association.** Founded in 1914, the Illinois Restaurant Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting, protecting, educating and improving the restaurant industry in Illinois. The IRA owns and produces Chicago Gourmet – the annual food and wine festival uniting hundreds of restaurants, chefs and beverage experts for a weekend filled with food and drink tastings, entertainment, cooking demonstrations, book signings, interactive seminars and more. For more information about the Illinois Restaurant Association, visit [www.illinoisrestaurants.org](http://www.illinoisrestaurants.org) and follow on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#).