

Statement: Keeping People Safe While Making Essential Trips During COVID-19 Crisis

April 13, 2020

[MassDPH's public health advisory](#) states: "only leave your home to address essential needs, get some fresh air and exercise, and if you do, avoid unnecessary contact with other individuals." It is still permissible to travel outside for essential reasons as long as we maintain at least six feet of physical distance between us.

However, in some neighborhoods people are finding that sidewalks and paths are not wide enough to accommodate this recommendation, causing many to move into the street to create sufficient physical distance from other people. In addition, some of the drivers on our uncongested roads are speeding and not observing stop signs and traffic lights, thus putting people at risk of injury or death in a traffic crash.

We call on Governor Baker and Massachusetts city and town leaders to make it safer for residents to take essential trips.

1. **Repurpose vehicle travel or parking lanes to provide residents with safe access to space that allows for physical distancing.** It's important to create conditions where there are more safe places for people to walk and bike for essential trips using safe distancing strategies, which will also help reduce crowding in parks and on paths. In an April 6th survey of 360 people from Metro Boston, 60% of respondents said that while they are walking and biking they feel "somewhat unsafe" to "very unsafe" in terms of maintaining the recommended six-foot distance.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution and we recognize that cities and towns are already capacity-constrained in many ways. We recommend that every municipality focus first on areas that are most critical such as:

- Routes to grocery stores and spaces where people are queuing or waiting in groups, including in front of grocery stores, takeout restaurants, or busy bus stops
- Neighborhoods that have fewer parks, green spaces, or private yards, where people need outdoor space near their homes
- Main Streets or commercial districts: where retail is closed or take-out only, parking lanes can be repurposed for expanded sidewalks or pick up zones for take-out, using temporary cones or signage

We also believe that these interventions will likely be needed long after the Massachusetts stay-at-home advisory is lifted or modified. COVID-19 mitigation is a long-term strategy. Many people, especially our most vulnerable, will need to maintain safe physical distancing strategies through the coming months.

2. **In more dense communities, issue a speed reduction advisory to 20 mph on local streets and make public announcements to residents that every street is considered**

a shared street. Let drivers know that they should expect people walking, biking, rolling, or running to be in the street as they maintain appropriate physical distance on narrow sidewalks and paths, and therefore should be prepared to yield to people on foot and bike and to drive slowly. In rural communities, this public messaging is also important, as more people are out in areas that don't have sidewalks or other separated walking or bicycling infrastructure (for example in the town of Egremont, local police officers are so concerned that they have been handing out reflective vests to pedestrians to ensure they are visible to drivers). To ensure maximum compliance, Governor Baker and mayors will need to spread clear and consistent messaging about the need for drivers to slow down.

3. **Reduce the cycle length of traffic signals at key intersections to reduce delay for all road users, including people walking, biking, and driving.** This will both increase the frequency of red lights to help discourage drivers from speeding, and will reduce crowding by pedestrians waiting to cross at intersections with high levels of foot traffic. If the data exists, as it does in the Vision Zero cities of Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville, we encourage cities to prioritize intersections that are proven to be high crash or high speed locations.

4. **Automate WALK signals so pedestrians do not have to push buttons in key locations.** It is one less surface to touch and potentially contract/spread disease. [Brookline and Cambridge have already started this effort](#), and other communities should follow, prioritizing signals that are in areas with more pedestrian traffic (i.e. near grocery stores, hospitals, and school lunch pickup locations). Knowing that this change requires city staff to make manual adjustments, we urge municipalities to prioritize critical locations.

5. **Communicate these changes in a manner that is accessible to everyone.** Use press conferences, social media, physical signage, and other communications strategies to ensure that all residents, regardless of internet access or language spoken, can understand how to make essential trips safely. Interventions should not involve increased police enforcement, which would call on police departments that do not have such capacity, and could also lead to tensions and fearfulness in immigrant communities and communities of color.

We support our state and municipal leaders in addressing safety issues for Massachusetts residents during this challenging time.

