

COVID-19 ECONOMIC RE-OPENING & RECOVERY PLAN

Illinois House Republican Caucus

The global COVID-19 pandemic poses an unprecedented challenge to the nation and our state. With no vaccine on the horizon and a lack of effective treatments, Illinois has been compelled to issue Stay-At-Home Orders, close our schools and universities to in-classroom learning, and require social distancing and face coverings in public.

For two months now, the State of Illinois has been hyper-focused, rightfully, on its response to the devastating effects of COVID-19. However, when crafting long-term or even medium-term public policy, it is important to make decisions through a wide lens. It is through that wider lens that the House Republican Caucus offers its suggestions for changes to state regulations for combating this virus that will put Illinois on the road to recovery.

The House Republican Caucus appreciates Governor JB Pritzker's and his administration's efforts to keep the public informed on the impact of COVID-19 and how the State is responding to this unprecedented challenge. However, the Governor cannot govern on his own via repeated disaster declarations and Executive Orders. The Illinois General Assembly is a separate but co-equal branch of government. We strongly believe it is the responsibility of legislators to work with the Executive branch to implement a plan to re-open Illinois' economy on a safe, responsible, and regional basis.

COVID-19 ECONOMIC RECOVERY COMMISSION

We propose the creation of a COVID-19 Economic Recovery Commission, to be assembled as soon as possible, to expand the list of experts and stakeholders involved in the decision-making process and development of a comprehensive plan to re-open Illinois on the path to economic recovery.

The COVID-19 Economic Recovery Commission ("Commission") should include public health experts, health care providers, business and labor leaders, economic policy experts, educators, community leaders, and state and local elected officials (including members of the Illinois General Assembly).

Appointees to the Commission should be representative of the broad geographic and economic diversity of the entire state. Appointments to the Commission should not just be made by the Governor, but also the four legislative leaders, and potentially from stakeholders such as the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association and the Illinois Retail Merchants Association.

The Illinois General Assembly should immediately create a COVID-19 Recovery Joint Committee with powers to draft and forward COVID-related recovery legislation to the two chambers. As much as possible, this joint committee should reflect the geographic balance of the state and operate in a bi-cameral, bi-partisan manner, similar to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR).

A REGIONAL APPROACH TO RECOVERY

The House Republican Caucus supports a regional approach to economic recovery. Across Illinois, private citizens, health care professionals, business leaders, and government officials are offering thoughts and input on how to address both the public health emergency and the economic crisis we are currently facing. Many have advocated for a regional approach to managing the situation.

Other states have developed recovery plans that utilize regional or county-by-county approaches, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all plan on large and geographically diverse populations.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY ZONES

We propose the creation of economic recovery zones and the empowerment of each zone to implement a regional response to re-opening and recovery.

The State of New York is utilizing ten (10) regions for re-opening/recovery.¹ Illinois should take a similar approach, based on a) geographic location, and b) regional association to a large or mid-sized community. Potential economic recovery zones include:

1. Cook County
2. Collar Counties
3. Northern Illinois (north of I-88, exurbs west to Mississippi River)
4. Quad Cities Region
5. North Central Illinois (center of state, Peoria/Bloomington/Normal north to I-88)
6. East Central Illinois (Champaign, Danville south to I-70)
7. South Central Illinois (center of state, Springfield, Decatur south to I-70)
8. Western Illinois (Quincy north to Galesburg)
9. Southwestern Illinois (Metro East region)
10. Southeastern Illinois (rest of Southern Illinois outside of the Metro East region)

Community and economic leaders in those recovery zones, in cooperation with county health departments, should drive decision making and have an official role in helping to reopen and revive their local economy. Plans should be developed and carried out by each recovery zone, with oversight/input of the State.

Testing, tracing, & reporting of COVID-19 has to be essential to making this work. Testing capability needs to be increased across the state. The recovery zones need to have response guidelines in place in case of a spike in cases after reopening measures have been put in place. This is the nexus between the health side and economic side of COVID-19.

COUNTY-BY-COUNTY APPROACH

¹ <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/amid-ongoing-covid-19-pandemic-governor-cuomo-outlines-additional-guidelines-phased-plan-re>

Another possible regional approach to economic recovery would be to utilize a county-by-county approach. Deputy Republican Leader Tom Demmer recently proposed a plan to empower counties to create regional plans for COVID-19 recovery.²

It isn't reasonable to expect the Illinois Department of Public Health to create and implement 102 different plans to cover each county in Illinois. Instead, we should look to the health experts and officials who are already working within these counties. Together with county health departments, local hospitals and clinics, first responders, municipal officials, and other key stakeholders, we should empower the creation of regional plans for dealing with COVID-19.

This proposal would allow an individual county or group of counties to create, publicize, and implement their own regional plan for COVID-19 response. Each county already has a public health department, with experts who are working every day to protect public health and safety.

A county or group of counties would be required to consider and detail their response plan for specific criteria, including:

- Average daily testing counts, and plan to ensure ongoing testing levels
- Confirmed case count and trend
- Local availability of hospital beds, ICU beds, ventilators
- Local number of first responders, nurses, physicians, and healthcare personnel
- Surge plan, including mass testing and rapid response ability for suspected clusters
- Supply levels for testing swabs, personal protective equipment (PPE), and sanitizing products
- Number of community organizations and businesses who are participating in best practices to limit physical contact, ensure social distancing, and make accommodations to promote employee and customer safety
- Methods to communicate status and information to the public in a clear and timely way

A regional plan must include current COVID-19 data, as well as indicate specific benchmarks for how an improvement could allow for relaxed restrictions, while an increase of COVID-19 cases would require tighter restrictions.

A regional plan would give details on different phases of restrictions, with specific examples of what activity is allowed or prohibited during each phase.

A regional plan would require approval of relevant County Boards, County Health Departments, and hospitals, and submission to IDPH and to the public.

A successful regional plan would incorporate models, criteria, and phase recommendations from reports published by the federal³ and state government, the Centers for Disease Control,⁴ the National Governors Association,⁵ and other similar third-party validators.

² <https://tomdemmer.org/2020/04/29/allow-local-leaders-to-create-regional-plan-for-covid-19/>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

⁵ <https://www.nga.org/center/publications/health/roadmap-to-recovery/>

Governor Pritzker’s Executive Orders would apply to counties or regions who have not formulated and approved their own response plans, but those areas who have taken the appropriate steps to create plans and win local stakeholder approval would be permitted to operate under their local plan guidelines.

Because of the specific criteria which must be addressed, a county could not simply decree that no restrictions apply. Instead, we set a universal threshold and then empower local officials to survey their area and make appropriate guidelines based on their circumstances and capacities. Some areas may see additional restrictions, and some may see fewer restrictions.

Already, local officials are having discussions like these.⁶ We believe it is appropriate and responsible to empower those with “boots on the ground” in each county to choose to create and implement their own plans. This approach will promote public health and safety while allowing for a more responsive and tailored approach to meet the unique needs of each region.

ASSURING PUBLIC BUY-IN

As the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders have continued, the general public has been deluged with an endless “information overload” of 24/7 news coverage, daily press briefings and coronavirus cases counts. With most Illinoisans at home, daily life under COVID-19 has taken on a “Groundhog Day” sense of repetition. Under these circumstances, there are concerns that the public may tune out the news and be lulled into a sense of complacency.

It is important that the State’s economic recovery plan take these considerations into account. We must ensure that any phased-in, regional recovery plan is presented to the public in an easy-to-understand manner that can be easily followed.

For example, Utah Leads Together,⁷ the State of Utah’s comprehensive plan to mitigate the economic consequences of COVID-19, utilizes a color-coded health guidance system to determine the risk to the public. According to Utah Leads Together, economic recovery is not like flipping a switch, it’s more like moving a dial. The color-coded health guidance system developed by the task force will guide Utahns as they make adjustments to open businesses, but still keep their most at risk populations safe.

Utah’s color-coded health guidance system includes:

- RED: High Risk (Stay Home, Stay Safe)
- ORANGE: Moderate Risk
- YELLOW: Low Risk
- GREEN: New Normal

⁶ <https://www.adamscountytogether.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-0422-Road-to-Recovery-Framework-LR.pdf>

⁷ <https://coronavirus.utah.gov/utah-leads-together/>

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

HOUSE REPUBLICAN COVID-19 RESPONSE

As the COVID-19 pandemic and Illinois' stay-at-home order took effect in March, House Republican Leader Jim Durkin appointed an internal Economic Recovery Working Group. Chaired by Deputy Republican Leader Dan Brady, the House Republican Working Group held a series of conference calls and online meetings to develop a plan for economic recovery. Please see the attached HGOP COVID-19 Response PDF for details on the Working Group's recommendations for economic recovery.

UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT PROBLEMS AT IDES

To better assist the more than 800,000 Illinoisans who have applied for unemployment benefits, the Pritzker Administration must put solving the problems⁸ with the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) at the top of their list. State employees should be reassigned from other agencies to assist IDES frontline staff. The private sector must be engaged to assist in the ongoing problems. It should be the goal of IDES that every Illinoisan who is trying to apply for unemployment benefits gets some sort of answer/response the very day they are contacting the agency.

MENTAL HEALTH

During a recent Mental Health and Wellness working group hearing, testimony revealed that alerts on school Chromebooks that warn of potential suicides have increased dramatically during the pandemic. We are concerned that the many anecdotal stories of increased adult suicides will eventually become massive statistics that will be studied for years to come. Links between higher unemployment and suicides rates are well documented.⁹

Domestic violence cases are increasing.¹⁰ People aren't seeking treatment for things like alcohol and drug addiction. But the easiest way to explain our concern is simply this: poverty kills. There is a 10-15 year life expectancy gap between the richest and poorest Americans.¹¹

The unintended consequences cannot be ignored. Our goal is to find a balance between saving lives while fighting coronavirus, while also avoiding as many unintended consequences as possible.

The Pritzker Administration should take into consideration the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has on mental health. Hotlines and other support programs can be effective in helping people stay positive, but there should be real consideration given to the fact that people need more than

⁸ <https://repdurkin.com/illinois-house-republicans-call-for-immediate-remedies-to-unemployment-failures-at-ides/>

⁹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/02/the-link-between-unemployment-and-suicide/>

¹⁰ <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/492506-domestic-violence-cases-surge-amid-stay-at-home-orders>

¹¹ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/04/for-life-expectancy-money-matters/>

just hope to stay positive. A short and long-term plan which is achievable and that offers real guidance on how the state will begin re-opening is essential.