

United Methodist Advocacy in Pennsylvania

March 31, 2020

As the month of March began, the Pennsylvania General Assembly was concluding its last budget hearings and preparing to focus on formulating a spending and revenue package for fiscal year 2020-21. As we are all aware, at that time, the Coronavirus 19 pandemic started to manifest itself in the United States.

In Pennsylvania, the Wolf Administration acted quickly. The General Assembly also diverted its attention to respond to the immediacy of the situation. Following is a timeline of Pennsylvania's response to COVID-19:

On **March 6**, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Pennsylvania. On the same day, Gov. Tom Wolf issues an emergency declaration.

March 9, the governor announces that all major health insurers in the state will cover COVID-19 testing and treatment, including waiving co-payments for testing.

March 9, state Department of Health Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine begins daily press conference updates on the COVID-19 situation in Pennsylvania. These updates are broadcast by cable TV network PCN.

March 13, President Donald Trump declares a national emergency, allowing additional direct funding to aid federal, state and local government responses to the the COVID-19 crisis.

March 13, the governor orders all K-12 public schools closed for two weeks, beginning March 16. On **March 30**, school closings were extended "until further notice."

March 15, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issues guidance that no gatherings with 50 or more people take place for eight weeks.

Between **March 15** and the end of the month, nearly 850,000 unemployment compensation applications have been filed by Pennsylvanians. By comparison, 309,000 state residents applied during the entire month of February.

March 16, the governor orders that the entire state, starting at midnight, begin mitigation efforts to promote social distancing, including closing non-essential businesses and ending dine-in service at restaurants and bars.

March 16, the state House of Representatives cancels some sessions and changes its rules to provide for social distancing, including provisions for a member not physically present to vote.

March 18, the state Senate implements rules to conduct business remotely, allowing senators to participate in committee meetings and floor sessions without being physically present.

March 19, the governor orders all non-life sustaining businesses to close, with enforcement to begin **March 23**.

March 20, elaborating on his order the previous day, the governor reveals a waiver process for businesses that think they are wrongly classified as non-life sustaining. He also says the commonwealth is working on a \$60 million loan program for small businesses.

March 23, the governor announces a "stay at home" order for seven counties, meaning that people are not to leave their homes unless staying in place would endanger a life. As of **March 31**, the list has since grown to 33 counties (out of 67 statewide) and the duration set until April 30.

March 23, state Attorney General Josh Shapiro's office reveals it has received 2,300 consumer complaints regarding price-gauging. Up to that point, it has issued 68 cease and desist letters to sellers. Act 133 of 2006 prohibits sellers from selling at excessive prices during a state of emergency. Consumers can report price gouging via email: pricegouging@attorneygeneral.gov.

March 24, state Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding and Secretary of Human Services (DHS) Teresa Miller announce that Pennsylvania's food supply is secure and food shortages are not a worry. They encouraged restraint in food shopping and cautioned against panic buying (defined as purchasing more than usual). However, they note special efforts are needed to help food banks and pantries stay viable. Miller added that DHS is sending additional funds to SNAP (food stamp) recipients to provide two weeks food supplies.

March 25, the General Assembly passes four bills in response to the COVID-19 emergency--

House Bill 68, waiving certain waiting requirements for Unemployment Compensation claimants, among other changes to the UC law.

House Bill 1232, delaying collection of Personal Income Tax and local Earned Income Tax until July 15, and authorizing up to \$50 million to be used within the state's health care system.

Senate Bill 751, changing state education rules for the 2019-20 school year. It authorizes 1) the state Education Secretary to order the closure of all school entities until the COVID-19 threat has ended, 2) waives the requirement for 180 days of instruction, including nonpublic schools, and 3) requires continued compensation of school employees through the end of the emergency.

Senate Bill 422, making changes to the state election law, including moving the date of the state primary election from April 28 to June 2.

March 27, Governor Wolf signs into law the four bills passed by the General Assembly two days earlier.

March 29, the Governor and Health Secretary Dr. Levine reveal the Pennsylvania Department of State hopes to bolster health care providers by easing regulations to reactivate licenses for retired physicians, physician assistants, nurses, nurse practitioners, therapists and pharmacists who want to return to their fields.

Stay At Home Exemptions

People living in counties under “stay at home” orders may leave their residences for the following reasons:

- Tasks essential to an individual or family for health and safety reasons.
- Obtaining supplies and services to maintain a safe environment in the household, or to help others in these efforts.
- Walking, hiking or exercising, provided one maintains social distancing.
- Performing work in life-sustaining businesses to provide essential products or services.
- Traveling for reasons of employment, court or law enforcement, or to care for the elderly, disabled, children and others needing support.

COVID-19 Statistics in Pennsylvania (as of March 31)

- Total diagnoses cases: 4,843.
- Deaths: 63.
- Highest density: Philadelphia, roughly 25 percent of total cases.
- Age distribution: 48% age 50 and older, 41% ages 25 to 49, 10% ages 19 to 24.
- Hospitalized: at least 514, 10.6% of those testing positive. 159 required intensive care. 94 needed a ventilator.
- Age of Hospitalized: 51% 65 and older, 26% age 50 to 64, 21% age 25 to 49, 1% age 19 to 24, 1% under 19.
- According to the PA Health Department, there are currently 3,400 licensed ICU beds in Pennsylvania, with approximately 40 percent of those beds available. More than 4,000 ventilators are available across the state.

Special Elections

State House Republicans maintained control of three seats under contention during special elections held March 17. The seats were vacated by GOP members earlier this year. Tim Bonner won in Mercer County, 8th District. Eric Davanzo won in Westmoreland County, 58th District. K.C. Tomlinson won in Bucks County, 18th District.

All three will need to run again in November, with their opponents likely to be the same.

Democrat G. Roni Green, who won a special election in February for a vacant seat in Philadelphia’s 190th Legislative District, was sworn on March 16.

Wolf Vetoes Oil-Gas Industry Tax Credit

On March 27, Gov. Tom Wolf vetoed **House Bill 1100**, as promised. The measure was intended to attract industries that use methane—most likely petrochemical and fertilizer manufacturers.

HB 1100 would provide a tax credit of 47 cents per thousand cubic feet of methane—a major component of natural gas—used by a business that has made a capital investment of at least \$450 million in order to construct and put into operation the facility using methane, and created a combined 800 full-time-equivalent jobs.

According to a Senate Appropriations Committee analysis of the proposal, such a rate for the "typical facility" would produce a tax credit of \$6.6 million annually. The Wolf administration says the credit would cost closer to \$22 million per year per facility—a revenue loss not worth the sacrifice.

Environmental advocates applauded the veto. Business and industry advocates questioned the veto.

HB 1100 was passed in the General Assembly by a veto-proof majority on February 4. The question is whether the Democrats who originally voted for the bill will now vote to oppose the veto of a governor of their own party.

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