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Elected Officials, Business Leaders Provide Guidance as County Moves to Yellow

PITTSBURGH – County Executive Rich Fitzgerald was joined by elected officials and business leaders this morning to provide basic guidance for employers and employees as the county moves to the yellow phase of reopening this Friday, May 15.

“We have been successful in our efforts to date because we are all working together, and we need to continue to do so,” said Fitzgerald. “Businesses that will now be conducting in-person operations need to ensure that they’re following all of the guidance from the state, but – just as importantly – they need to do that in conjunction with the businesses that they share office space or a building with to ensure that we’re all doing our part to physically distance.”

The guidance from the Pennsylvania Department of Health (PA-DOH) provides that all businesses that have been conducting their operations in whole or in-part remotely through individual teleworking of its employees must continue telework operations for each of those employees.

In the yellow phase, businesses that must conduct in-person operations and activities because their employees cannot telework must follow additional guidance from PA-DOH, including:

- Cleaning and disinfecting high-touch areas frequently and continuing to regularly clean all other areas of the building(s);
- Establishing and implementing a plan in case the business is exposed to a probable or confirmed case of COVID-19;
- Preventing large groups from entering or leaving the building by staggering work start and stop times;
- Limiting the number of people in employee common areas, like locker rooms or break rooms, and ensuring these areas are cleaned frequently;
- Conducting meetings and trainings virtually; if a meeting needs to be held in person, limiting the number of employees to 10 and maintaining a physical distance of six feet;
- Making sure employees have access to soap and water to wash their hands, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes;
- Providing non-medical masks for employees to wear at all times and make it mandatory to wear masks while on the work site while working in the same area (room) as others; employers may approve masks obtained or made by employees according to the Pennsylvania Department of Health policies;
- Making sure the facility has enough employees as applicable to follow these protocols and conduct business effectively and safely;
- Discouraging non-essential visitors from entering the business premises; and,
- Communicating these procedures to all employees to ensure that everyone knows how to be safe.

Dr. Debra L. Bogen, Director of the Allegheny County Health Department, reiterated the need for residents to continue the work that they’ve been doing to ensure that this county can remain in the yellow. She also cautioned that if people do not follow the guidelines and there is a substantial spike in cases, it could mean that additional restrictions could again be imposed on Allegheny County.

“We don’t know how the move to yellow will impact our cases, but the Health Department is prepared to respond to whatever may happen,” said Bogen. “Most importantly, we need to keep up the good work. If you’re sick, stay home. If you have symptoms, call your primary care physician or the department’s COVID-19 Hotline. If you do go out, wear a mask and stay at least six feet away from others. Wash your hands frequently and clean frequently-touched services often.”

Congressman Mike Doyle recognized that the move to yellow doesn’t return everyone to work and noted that small businesses, in particular, remain impacted by the pandemic and the measures taken to control it in this region.

“These are tough times for businesses that are closed and people who are unemployed,” Doyle observed. “I’ve been working with my colleagues in Congress to ensure that our small businesses and families have the resources they need to get by until we can safely reopen the economy and get everybody back to work. That means providing more aid to households, businesses, and state and local governments as we move cautiously from red to yellow to green – and it means making sure that this aid gets to its intended recipients quickly. I’ve been bird-dogging the federal agencies responsible for running the small business programs and sending the economic impact payments, letting them know about problems people from Pittsburgh are having and urging the agencies to fix them promptly.”

“As the slow and thoughtful process of opening Allegheny County begins, we need to remember that we were able to flatten the curve because we did it together and we need that same commitment to each other as we begin this next step,” said Congressman Lamb. “We have a long way to go but getting people back to work while also making people feel safe, is a good first step. Congress needs to get back to work and provide more relief for families and businesses.”

City of Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto stressed the importance of following the guidance provided by the state as the region moves to yellow: “Pittsburgh is home to two of the three largest job centers in the state. Based on the population density, particularly in downtown Pittsburgh and Oakland, it’s absolutely imperative that these measures are followed closely.”

The Allegheny Conference on Community Development has focused on supporting businesses during the pandemic by providing ongoing, up-to-date information about the resources available including where to get assistance and where to give assistance. As part of that effort, the Conference’s Chief Executive Officer Stefani Pashman announced the launch of a new resource at <https://readypittsburgh.com>; a curated toolbox offering advice, direction, guidance and practices on how to reopen and remain open while keeping employees, customers and neighbors safe.

“This has been challenging and the entire world has suffered. But here in our region, we have fared better than many places,” said Pashman. “We’ve been able to flatten the curve because of the commitment of our people. To reopen safely and sustainably, we need to apply what we’ve learned over these past few months - remaining vigilant while moving forward. This new resource allows us to continue supporting the efforts of our business community to open the economy in a thoughtful and phased way that also prioritizes public health.”

Matt Smith, President of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, an affiliate of the Allegheny Conference, mirrored those words and joined officials in calling for continued partnerships.

“Our region has a rich history of coming together to face challenges – we see that this has been no different. Our people came together and made a difference – they stayed home – they saved lives,” said Smith. “As we step into this next phase of the pandemic, it is going to be vital that we continue to work together with our public and private partners to chart a path forward that allows us to open our economy – in a sustainable, smart way. We need to stay open – we need to keep our residents safe – we need our economy to thrive. We can have all three by working together.”

The guidelines from PA-DOH also include measures to protect employees that serve the public. Those precautions include:

- Conducting business with the public by appointment only, whenever possible;
- If appointment-only service is not feasible, limiting the number of people inside the building to no more than 50% of the total maximum occupancy;

- Modifying the hours of business so that there is enough time to clean and restock;
- Installing shields or other barriers at registers and check-out areas to physically separate cashiers and customers, or take other measures to maintain physical distancing between customers and employees;
- Encouraging customers to use online ordering by providing delivery or pick-up options;
- Designating a specific time for people at high risk, including those over the age of 65 to use the business at least once a week;
- Requiring all customers to wear masks while on the premises or providing an alternate, no contact, means of delivering good for customers who cannot wear a mask;
- In businesses with multiple check-out lanes, limiting use to every other register, rotating use of those lanes, and cleaning the previously-opened registers and the surrounding areas;
- Scheduling handwashing breaks for employees at least every hour; and
- Assigning an employee to wipe down carts and handbaskets before customer use.

Doris Carson Williams, President of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western PA, reiterated the need for all businesses to understand the requirements for reopening while also ensuring that business owners themselves continue to set a good example.

“The African American Chamber has worked with our partners to understand what will be best practices as we move to the yellow phase,” said Williams. “I encourage small business owners to wear their masks, continue to wash your hands, and prepare how to stage your offices – and practice physical distancing.”

Audrey Russo, President and CEO of the Pittsburgh Technology Council, noted that the council’s members don’t fall into many of the traditional categories contemplated in the governor’s orders, but that the organization will continue to ensure consistency in implementing robust, safe procedures: “The technology business community is reflective of diverse and varied market sectors. While many companies can succeed and thrive by working remotely, many will continue to do so beyond May 15th while we remain under yellow protocols. However, there are many businesses which require prototyping, lab work, testing, and field work. Collaboration and manufacturing are essential.”

Darrin Kelly, President of the Allegheny/Fayette Central Labor Council, AFL/CIO, also urged employers to focus on protecting employees and residents as they move to open up:

“We have worked hard as a community to get to this point and we don’t want to step backward,” said Kelly. “The measures we take today will allow us to continue moving our economy forward but will also protect our community. We can’t do one without the other.”

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