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POLITICS

Gov. Whitmer closing high schools, colleges, in-person dining, casinos, movie theaters

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Lansing — Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer announced wide-ranging new restrictions to limit gatherings at high schools, colleges and restaurants Sunday to combat what she described as the "worst moment" yet in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new policies will temporarily halt in-person instruction at high schools and colleges, indoor dine-in service at restaurants and bars, and high school athletics as well as close some businesses, including movie theaters, bowling alleys and casinos.

The restrictions, imposed through a Michigan Department of Health and Human Services order, will take effect Wednesday, will be in place for three weeks and will end Dec. 8. Under the order, indoor residential gatherings will be limited to two households at any one time.

"The situation has never been more dire," Whitmer said Sunday. "We are at the precipice, and we need to take some action."

The state's public health code allows the Michigan health department to "prohibit the gathering of people for any purpose" and to "establish procedures" to ensure the "continuation of essential public health services and enforcement of health laws."

The governor announced the new order at a Sunday night press conference — a rare weekend briefing that came five days after Whitmer told reporters she was exploring the "next steps" her administration would take against COVID-19 as the virus surges here.

Under the new policies, hair salons, retail shops and preschool through eighth-grade schools will still be allowed to be open. Restaurants can offer take-out and outdoor dining, and gyms and pools can be open for individual exercise.

Michigan shattered its weekly coronavirus case record last week with a total of 44,019 new cases reported, the fifth consecutive record week for confirmed infections. About 3,220 adults were hospitalized statewide with COVID-19 on Friday, compared with 999 COVID inpatients a month earlier on Oct. 13, according to state data.

"The dramatic rise in admissions at hospitals across Michigan is not sustainable," said Wright Lassiter III, president and CEO of the Detroit-based Henry Ford Health System. "We strongly urge everyone to honor these restrictions and continue safety measures like wearing masks, avoiding gatherings, and practicing social distancing and hand hygiene."

The state reported 416 new deaths linked to the virus last week, which was the largest weekly total since early May.

Whitmer's press conference came 11 days before Thanksgiving. She asked people to "make the difficult but right choice" and avoid large gatherings during the holiday.

"If you are considering spending Thanksgiving with people outside of your household, I urge you to reconsider," Whitmer said.

Of family members, she added, "As hard as it is not seeing them this Thanksgiving, imagine how much harder it would be if you weren't able to see them for a future holiday ever again."

Republican lawmakers push back

Michigan reported its first cases of the coronavirus on March 10. The virus initially peaked here in April before a second surge hit in recent weeks.

On Oct. 2, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled 4-3 that a state law allowing the governor to declare emergencies and keep them in place without legislative input — the 1945 Emergency Powers of the Governor Act — was unconstitutional.

The emergency declarations were previously what allowed the governor to issue executive orders to unilaterally fight the virus. Since the court ruling, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services has used epidemic orders from its director, Robert Gordon, to take actions like requiring masks be worn in public places and limiting gathering sizes.

On Oct. 29, Gordon issued orders limiting non-residential indoor gatherings without fixed seating to 50 people — the limit was 500 — and restricting individual table sizes at restaurants to six people.

Michigan Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey, R-Clarklake, said Whitmer did not include advice from lawmakers in her new restrictions.

"We are disappointed that Gov. Whitmer chose to go it alone, again," Shirkey said. "The Senate Republicans will continue working with our doctors and the medical community on ways we can combat this virus and are ready to work with the governor when she decides to work as a team to fight this virus."

In the GOP-controlled House, Republicans "stand ready to act in a bipartisan way when the governor decides it is worth her time," Speaker Lee Chatfield, R-Levering, said Sunday. "Until then, we are still reviewing the details of this order like everyone else."

No spectators for college, pro sports

Gordon said indoor gatherings are the greatest source of COVID-19 spread currently and "sharply limiting them is our focus." Michigan has experienced fewer outbreaks associated with elementary and middle schools, and younger children are most in need of in-person instruction, according to state officials.

In a Sunday statement, officials from the Michigan Community College Association, Michigan Association of State Universities and Michigan Independent Colleges and Universities said they supported the new limitations.

"Many of our member colleges are in communities that are struggling with hospital capacity due to the recent resurgence of the pandemic," said Mike Hansen, president of the MCCA. "We are ready to do our part to help curb the spread of COVID-19."

While high school and other organized sports are suspended under the new order, professional and college sports meeting "extraordinary standards for risk mitigation" may continue without spectators, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services.

"At the University of Michigan, we will carefully examine the details of the order to make sure we are in compliance starting Wednesday, UM spokesman Rick Fitzgerald said.

Restaurant group 'profoundly disappointed'

Similarly, indoor dining at restaurants is inherently more dangerous with COVID-19 so present across the state, Whitmer contended.

But Justin Winslow, CEO and president of the Michigan Restaurant & Lodging Association, said his organization was "profoundly disappointed" by the new order.

"While this decision will absolutely lead to a catastrophic economic fallout, the human toll on restaurant owners and their employees will be dramatically worse than what Director Gordon is attempting to mitigate through this order based upon the department's own transmission data," Winslow added.

Whitmer's initial stay-at-home order took effect on March 24, 236 days ago. She began easing that policy in early June by loosening restrictions on the operations of businesses and workplaces and allowing larger outdoor gatherings.

Whitmer said the new restrictions were necessary to try to get the virus under control.

"It's going to be a tough winter," she said.

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