

DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK:

Principles for Getting Tennesseans Back to Work and Phasing in Our Economic Recovery

On April 13, 2020, Gov. Bill Lee announced an extension of Tennessee's Safer at Home Order until the end of April. In addition to this extension, Gov. Lee announced the creation of the Economic Recovery Group, tasked with formulating a plan to reboot the state's economy and put Tennesseans back to work, all while balancing the need to protect public health and safety amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

As the Economic Recovery Group begins to formulate a plan to phase-in the reopening of Tennessee's economy, the Beacon Center recommends the following steps.

Move from Delineating Essential versus Non-essential to Safe and Unsafe

Under Gov. Lee's Safer at Home Order under Executive Orders 22 and 23, "essential" businesses were allowed to remain open. Additionally, any business that could maintain health guidelines could also remain open. Under these initial orders, only specific "close-contact" or "entertainment" establishments were mandated to close, due to their higher risks of spreading infection.

As COVID-19 infection rates have slowed and the state's active cases appeared to have peaked, for the first phase of reopening our economy starting on May 1, any businesses that can maintain public health and safety guidelines should be allowed to open. Every Tennessean believes their livelihood is essential. Regardless of the industry a business is in, as long as measures such as social distancing and capacity limits can be followed, that business should be allowed to open. As new CDC guidance is issued that relaxes these limits, businesses should then be allowed to increase their capacity or open if they were previously unable to do so.

Additionally, to limit the potential of a possible spike as the economy reopens, any business that can easily allow its employees to operate remotely should be encouraged, but not mandated, to do so.

Provide Clarity and Certainty for Business Owners

Any businesses that cannot comply with current public health and safety guidelines and remains closed after May 1, 2020 should be given clear guidelines on when and how they can reopen and what specific metrics or benchmarks will trigger their ability to reopen. This will provide certainty, allow them to restock inventory, and give adequate time for a strained supply chain to operate.

Allow Businesses that Remain Closed to Conduct “Soft” Re-openings

COVID-19 will change the way many businesses operate, particularly those that have close physical contact with customers such as spas, massage parlors, or cosmetology establishments. These industries, especially in more densely populated areas, will likely need to implement new cleaning and sanitation procedures. Businesses that remain closed after May 1, 2020 should be allowed to convene staff to train employees for when they can reopen to better adjust to a post-pandemic world.

Remove Statewide Ban on Elective Medical Procedures

Gov. Lee originally banned elective medical procedures to preserve bed capacity and supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE). While Tennessee was wise to preserve hospital capacity and these supplies in order to fight the initial surge of COVID-19, hospitals—especially rural ones—are struggling due to the ban on elective medical procedures impeding this key source of revenue. With a declining growth of new cases, adequate supply of PPE, and no shortage of hospital beds, these restrictions should now be lifted. Removing the ban on these procedures will help medical facilities to get back on their feet. Additionally, now would be the ideal time for Tennesseans to undergo “quality of life” procedures, as many businesses will likely need smaller staffs for the near future. For example, while full staffs are not needed, allowing employees to get surgeries that relieve pain like back or knee surgeries can improve worker productivity after recovery and when businesses are in demand for more workers.

Maintain Existing Regulatory Suspensions

As part of his various executive orders, Gov. Bill Lee has suspended numerous statutes and regulations to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic. These suspensions have included various occupational licensing reforms, suspension of certificate of needs laws, and modified trucking regulations. These suspensions should be maintained as long as legally possible to provide relief to businesses, help fully mobilize the supply chain, and decrease the potential for any spike as social distancing measures are relaxed.

Resist Industry Favoritism or Focusing on Specific Companies

As Tennessee begins to phase in its economic recovery, policymakers will receive calls for assistance from every industry. And yet, despite aid from the federal government, the state will have limited resources. While some firms and industries, such as tourism and hospitality, have been impacted more than others, policymakers should resist singling out certain industries and businesses for special treatment in the recovery. Nearly every business has been impacted one way or another. Recovery policies and assistance should therefore be applied as broadly as possible.

Ron Shultis • Director of Policy and Research
ron@beaontn.org • 615-383-6431

BeaconTN.org | f/BeaconTN | @BeaconTN | @Beacon_TN

