

**COVID-19 Press Conference
Governor Brian P. Kemp
Wednesday, April 8, 2020**

Introduction

Good afternoon, everyone.

Before I get started, I want to take a moment to talk about my friend and former Senate colleague Jack Hill who unexpectedly passed away on Monday.

Georgia has lost a gentle giant.

Jack Hill was a longtime public servant and Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

He was respected and loved by countless people in his community and across our state...

Earlier today, I signed an executive order directing flags to fly at half-staff across Georgia this Friday.

I ask all Georgians to lift up his loved ones and colleagues in prayer as they grapple with his loss.

This afternoon, I'm joined by DPH Commissioner Dr. Kathleen Toomey, Georgia National Guard Adjutant General Tom Carden, and GEMA Director Homer Bryson.

As always, I want to thank these hardworking Georgians - and their staff - for their tireless efforts.

We are fortunate to have the best and brightest leading the charge.

Today, we are reporting a total of 9,901 coronavirus cases in Georgia.

And I'm saddened to announce that 362 Georgians have passed as a result of COVID-19...

I ask all Georgians in every corner of our great state to join me in praying for all of the families who have lost loved ones to COVID-19, and those who are battling it right now.

During this sacred Holy Week, we must stay united in the fight against coronavirus.

I want to thank the millions of Georgians who are following public health guidance and helping us flatten the curve.

We are making progress.

I want to thank the frontline workers who are sacrificing everyday to keep us all safe... first responders, law enforcement, our doctors, nurses, and medical staff...

These men and women are doing heroic work.

Keep praying for their safety and their families who many of these frontline workers are unable to see as they fight this pandemic.

While I am encouraged by some of the recent data, we still have incredible challenges ahead.

Yesterday, I had a call with Commissioner Gary Black and other ag leaders to reaffirm our unwavering support for Georgia's oldest and largest industry.

COVID-19 is hitting our state hard... and it's impacting our farm families in a number of ways.

First, much of the demand for Georgia farm products is from our schools and food service industries.

With schools shuttered and many restaurants scaling back, our farmers are seeing prices plummet and demand diminish.

Farms that use our country's seasonal worker programs are seeing good crops this year, but now have limited markets to sell them.

However, these same farmers are still on the hook for paying 75% of the contract work they signed for before COVID-19 ever hit Georgia.

Coming off generational losses from Hurricane Michael, this is another punch in the gut for Georgia farmers.

In the coming days, I will make these concerns known to our federal partners and ask them to keep farmers top of mind when crafting a Phase 4 stimulus package.

Rest assured, we will continue to fight for Georgia's agriculture industry and the families who feed and clothe the world from right here in the Peach State.

Now, more than ever, I hope you will join me in supporting our farmers and agri-business leaders by purchasing Georgia Grown and Georgia Made products.

Every purchase matters. Every dollar spent provides relief.

There's no doubt that COVID-19 is impacting other industries and workers too.

Thousands of Georgians are out of work, and we have started to see the effects of that on our state's safety net, especially when it comes to unemployment benefits.

I'd like to thank the great work of our Labor Commissioner Mark Butler.

He is doing everything in his power to get out-of-work Georgians the funds that they desperately need.

His team has processed a record number of unemployment claims in the last two weeks.

They are working around the clock to meet the needs of hardworking Georgians in a timely and efficient manner.

Earlier this week, I asked Vice President Pence to check on federal guidance for self-employed workers, gig workers, and 1099 contractors from the U.S Department of Labor so that here in Georgia, Commissioner Butler can be approved to provide those funds.

Our Vice President assured me that he would do so, and we look forward to receiving the necessary guidance from Secretary Scalia and the U.S. Department of Labor soon.

As you know, I ordered that all of Georgia's K-12 public schools would remain closed through the end of the year.

As a parent of three, please know that this decision wasn't easy, but it was incredibly important as we work to keep our students, families, and communities safe.

Since that announcement, my staff has been in constant communication with education leaders across the state, and we have worked with State School Superintendent Richard Woods to help districts prepare and students adapt.

In the coming days, Superintendent Woods will partner with my office and launch working groups to develop guidelines and best practices for our schools involving meals, distance learning, facilities and equipment, mental health, and professional learning.

We will do whatever it takes to support our educators, students, and their parents during these challenging times.

This month, we have taken big steps in the fight against COVID-19.

General Carden and the Georgia National Guard have deployed to several long-term care facilities to clean and mitigate coronavirus exposure.

The Guard now has thirty-six infection control teams and completed missions at sixty-seven facilities in the last six days.

These teams have allowed the Guard to assist between seven and ten percent of all our state's nursing home facilities every day.

Once we reach 100%, they'll start over.

To provide more assistance to General Carden, his team, and our long-term care homes, I am taking new executive action to protect our state's most vulnerable citizens.

As we have mentioned previously, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has determined that older adults, people of any age who have serious, underlying health conditions, and certain other groups may be at higher risk for complications from coronavirus exposure.

The Georgia Department of Public Health has determined that COVID-19 is spreading through nursing homes, inpatient hospice, assisted living communities, personal care homes, intermediate care homes, community living arrangements, and community integration homes.

We have dramatically increased access to resources to these facilities to mitigate exposure, but we have to do more to protect these Georgians.

Earlier today, I signed an executive order extending Georgia's public health state of emergency through May 13, 2020.

This measure will allow us to deploy more resources to communities in need, lend support to frontline medical providers, and keep preparing as we brace for potential patient surge in our healthcare facilities.

I appreciate Lt. Governor Duncan, Speaker Ralston, and the General Assembly for working with us to ensure resources are available to proactively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This afternoon, I also signed an executive order mandating more aggressive infection control measures at long-term care facilities across Georgia.

I'll outline a few, key requirements.

Facilities must adopt infectious disease transfer protocols with nearby hospitals...
Visitors and non-essential personnel are strictly prohibited except in compassionate care situations.

If feasible, these facilities must provide in-room dining services, and all group activities are canceled.

Employees must wash or sanitize their hands after any interaction with a resident.

Facilities must implement protocols to screen residents for fever and respiratory symptoms, and employees must be screened before starting a shift.

If an employee is exposed, to the extent feasible, he or she must self-quarantine for fourteen days before returning to work.

Facilities are required to implement universal and correct use of personal protective equipment, and we stand ready to coordinate delivery of supplies.

Facilities must utilize hospital-grade disinfectants for frequent cleaning.

If possible, residents with symptoms of respiratory infection need to be placed together, and facilities should have specific employees working only on affected units.

To ensure compliance, I am empowering the Department of Public Health, National Guard, and Department of Community Health to issue directives to facilities to prevent, monitor, and treat COVID-19.

Today, I am also signing an executive order to activate 1,000 additional National Guard members to assist in COVID-19 emergency response.

In accordance with public health recommendations, I am also extending the statewide shelter in place order through April 30, 2020.

All of the provisions of the statewide shelter in place order will remain in effect.

I want to thank everyone who followed these directives, and I appreciate your patience.

I have also heard the concerns of many hardworking Georgians, including local elected officials, who fear that our state will become a vacation destination.

As a result, and in accordance with public health guidance, I have signed an order to suspend short-term vacation rentals across Georgia.

To stop the spread of COVID-19, no vacation rental shall occur in Georgia starting at midnight through 11:59 PM on Thursday, April 30.

The term “vacation rental” means any transaction to lease or license residential property for residential or vacation purposes facilitated by a third party or broker for thirty days or less between a corporation, partnership, person, or other entity and a private person.

There are exceptions.

This order **does not** include hotels, including extended stay hotels, motels, campgrounds, or purely commercial transactions.

This order **does not** include any vacation rental which has been fully paid and executed or agreed to before 12 AM on Thursday, April 9.

It also **does not** apply to leases for property to be used as someone’s primary place of residence. All state, county, and local law enforcement are authorized to enforce this order.

But at no time shall law enforcement or any other state or local official be allowed to dispossess or evict occupants of a vacation rental.

This action is just one of many steps we are taking to keep our people safe from this dangerous virus.

Expanding access to testing remains a top priority for the Coronavirus Task Force.

In addition to the USG testing partnership with the state lab, there are several new private sector partnerships throughout Georgia.

That includes the new CVS drive-thru facility at Georgia Tech, which is able to test 1,000 individuals per day at full capacity.

And we are excited to announce that DPH will begin a partnership with Ipsum Diagnostics, who recently received FDA approval.

Ipsum is able to test 2,000 specimens per day and will be able to expand capacity in the near future.

Testing will begin tomorrow at specimen collections sites across the state. Ipsum will be able to provide results to those tests within twenty-four hours.

Thanks to the University System, CVS, and Ipsum partnerships, the state will dramatically increase daily testing.

This expansion does not include testing currently available through private sector labs.

In addition to their work on testing, the University System of Georgia has also provided housing to traveling health care workers in the Albany area.

While these brave men and women are putting their lives on hold to serve our state, it is the very least we can do to show our gratitude and support.

And later today Chancellor Wrigley, General Carden, and I will issue a call to USG staff encouraging those who are medical and public health professionals to sign up through the Medical Reserve Corps.

I encourage all Georgians who qualify and are able to volunteer.

Last week, we announced an investment of \$72 million for an additional 296 beds.

Capacity is being added at Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital's main campus and Phoebe North at Eastside Medical Center in Snellville and with four temporary medical units, which will be strategically placed across the state.

We have also charged our state's hospitals who are on the frontlines of this fight to identify additional surge capacity within their systems.

I am pleased to announce that Georgia hospitals have identified hundreds of additional ICU and med-surg beds across the state to respond to COVID-19.

I look forward to sharing more details on this plan in the coming days.

Additionally, the state working under the leadership of General Tom Carden - is working on plans for additional surge capacity in sites across the state - should further capacity be needed.

But we can't take our foot off the gas. We have to keep working.

Our Task Force is working around the clock to meet the pressing and future needs of those we are honored to serve.

We remain hunkered down and prepared for any circumstance that comes our way.

In closing, I want to thank all of our partners.

It would be impossible to list everyone who's working with us to keep Georgians safe.

Again, many thanks to the Trump administration, Coronavirus Task Force members, first responders, law enforcement, healthcare workers, hospital administrators, associations, local officials Lieutenant Governor Geoff Duncan, Speaker David Ralston, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms.

Faith leaders, private-sector companies, and all of the hardworking Georgians out there making personal sacrifices for the greater good.

My wife, Marty, and the girls. You are my rock during these uncertain and unprecedented times.

As Governor of this great state, I am honored to serve my fellow Georgians.

We've had obstacles. There will be more, and there will be no shortage of challenges.

Sadly, there's no playbook for this.

But we continue to use data, science, and the advice of our healthcare officials to guide our steps toward a safer, healthier, and more prosperous future for all Georgians.

In closing, I want every single Georgian the ones who voted for me **and** the ones who didn't to know I'm working hard not to do what's popular not to do what's best for my politics and not to do what's easy.

I'm working every single day, as a husband, father, businessman, proud Georgia and your Governor to do what's right.

I ask for your patience and your prayers.

We are in this fight together, and we're going to emerge stronger because it...

Thank you, and God bless all of you.