

March 18, 2021

Governor Charlie Baker  
Massachusetts State House  
Office of the Governor  
24 Beacon Street, Room 280  
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we are writing to urge you to reconsider your decision to further increase the capacity of indoor venues on March 22, 2021. We ask you to heed the warning of Dr. Anthony Fauci, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, public health experts, and local epidemiologists who have cautioned that rolling back COVID-19 mitigation measures could lead to a fourth wave of the pandemic.

**We implore you to prevent more avoidable illness and loss of life by delaying any changes related to indoor venues as part of Step 1, Phase IV of the state's reopening plan for a minimum of four weeks.**

Step 1 Phase IV includes an increase in the gathering limits for indoor venues to 100 people, opening of dance floors at indoor events, opening of overnight camps, and opening of exhibition and convention halls. Additional time is needed before loosening these restrictions to allow more residents to be vaccinated, provide an opportunity for the state to reduce vaccine inequities that create increased risk in communities of color and among essential workers, provide schools the opportunity to reopen safely, and give the state adequate time to assess the threats posed by more infectious COVID-19 variants. We ask that you please consider the following:

- **Schools should be prioritized over other indoor venues.** Like you, we want to see our students, teachers, and staff return to school safety. We commend your decision to prioritize the vaccination of educators, staff, and childcare workers. However, given the pervasive issues in the state's vaccination distribution plan and supply limitations, the vast majority of the 400,000 eligible educators will be unable to receive their first and second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by the state's mandatory reopening on April 5th, much less reach fully-vaccinated status that requires another two weeks after the final shot. While Massachusetts focuses on a safe return to school, we should exercise caution and delay any further changes to indoor gathering limits that could lead to increased rates of community spread.
- **Emerging, more infectious variants of COVID-19 present a threat to the state's progress.** Although COVID-19 infection rates have trended downward from the record highs in January and February, as of March 14th, the state's 7-day average of [COVID -19 confirmed cases](#) was 1,174. We've witnessed how rapidly positive trends can shift when restrictions are eased prematurely. Furthermore, new, more infectious variants of COVID-19, including B.1.1.7 (first identified in the United Kingdom) and B.1.351 (first identified in South Africa) and P.1 (first identified in Brazil) threaten to reverse positive trends and increase the risk of community spread. Between March 11th and March 14th, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

(CDC), [reported](#) that cases of the B.1.17 variant in Massachusetts more than tripled to 371 and cases of the B.1.351 variant doubled to 10. The first known case of the P.1 variant in Massachusetts was identified this week. The high level of new, confirmed daily cases coupled with the threat of variants, should be a reason for caution. Loosening restrictions prematurely will increase the risk of a resurgence, which in fact, [is exactly what is happening across Europe](#).

- **Indoor dining increases the risk of exposure to COVID-19.** The full effect of the questionable decision to lift capacity limits for restaurants, indoor performance venues, and indoor recreational facilities on March 1st has not yet become clear. Further reopening of additional indoor venues should be delayed until the impact of this decision can be adequately assessed. Since last spring, emerging science and national data trends have shown indoor dining to be a [“high-risk activity that should only be resumed with extreme caution, if at all.”](#) Studies drawing on modeling, cell phone data, and epidemiology have reinforced that indoor dining carries a significant risk of exposure to COVID-19, for both the public and employees. A [recent study](#) led by Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences University, in partnership with the University of Massachusetts Lowell and the Department of Public Health, found an increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 among certain occupations compared with others. Most alarming, Latinx food service and preparation workers in the Commonwealth had a [mortality rate 8 times](#) that of White workers in the same occupation.
- **The risk of reopening will not be borne equally by all residents.** While the COVID-19 vaccines should be instrumental in moving all residents of the Commonwealth towards recovery, the rollout of the vaccine has only served to deepen existing inequities among Black, Latinx, immigrant, and low-income communities. In Massachusetts, White residents have received more than 15 times as many vaccinations as Latinx residents and more than 14 times as many vaccinations as Black residents— while at the same time, Black and Latinx residents have experienced a disproportionate share of infections and death. Reopening should not be prioritized while the Commonwealth has yet to address the inequities with the vaccination distribution plans and implementation.

Delaying further reopening of indoor venues by a minimum of four weeks will allow the state time to better assess these threats and make appropriate decisions at that time. Moving forward now in the face of these threats to our recovery - threats that will be disproportionately borne by workers, schools, and communities of color -- is unwise and unacceptably dangerous.

Sincerely,

Anna Leslie, **Allston Brighton Health Collaborative**

Dwain Tyndal, **Alternatives for Community & Environment**

Carol Rose, **American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts**

Beth Kontos, President, **American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts**

Cathy Costanzo, **the Center for Public Representation**

Karen Chen, **Chinese Progressive Association**

Sushama Scalera MD, **COVID-19 Action Coalition**

Laura Sylvester, **The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts**

Ellen Leigh, **Greater Boston Chapter of United Spinal Association**

Heather McMann, **Groundwork Lawrence**

Karen Emmons, **Harvard Catalyst Community Engagement Program**

Jennifer Valenzuela, **Health Leads**

Lady Lawrence Carty, **Housing = Health**

Helena DaSilva Hughes, **Immigrants' Assistance Center, Inc. (IAC)**

Cindy Rowe, **Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action**

Terry Greene, **John Snow, Inc.**

Sandra Heller, **Mass Families Organizing for Change**

Regina LaRocque, Sarah Primeau and Juliana E. Morris, **Massachusetts Coalition for Health Equity**

Jodi Sugerman-Brozan, **Massachusetts Coalition on Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH)**

Tara Hammes, **Massachusetts Councils on Aging**

Carlene Pavlos, **Massachusetts Public Health Association**

Merrie Najimy, **Massachusetts Teachers Association**

Marc Draisen, **Metropolitan Area Planning Council**

Jessica Wilson, **Mill City Grows**

Mehreen Butt, **Planned Parenthood Advocacy Fund**

Caroline Bays, **Progressive Massachusetts**

Gaby Thurston, **Rosie's Place**

Sharon Scott, **Union of Minority Neighborhoods**

Claire Müller, **Unitarian Universalist Mass Action**