

COVID-19: Cuomo announces new cluster action initiative

Developed in consultation with leading national public health experts: Dr. Noam Ross of EcoHealth Alliance, Dr. Michael Osterholm of the University of Minnesota, former CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden

*Fines for sponsors of mass gatherings increased to \$15,000
New rules and restrictions in effect for minimum of 14 days*

Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Tuesday announced a new cluster action initiative to address COVID-19 hot spots that have cropped up in Brooklyn and Queens, and Broome, Orange and Rockland counties. Working with the top public health experts, New York state developed a science-based approach to attack these clusters and stop any further spread of the virus, including new rules and restrictions directly targeted to areas with the highest concentration of COVID cases and the surrounding communities. The new rules will be in effect for a minimum of 14 days.

The plan was developed in consultation with national public health experts including Dr. Noam Ross of EcoHealth Alliance, Dr. Michael Osterholm of the University of Minnesota and former

Gov. Andrew Cuomo provides a coronavirus update during a press conference Tuesday in the Red Room at the State Capitol. (Photo: Mike Groll/Office of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo)

CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden.

“A cluster is just that – it’s a cluster of cases, a high density of cases, and it seeps and grows from that cluster almost in concentric circles. Drop a pebble into the pond, the pebble goes in, then there’s one ring, two rings, three rings, and the rings continue across the pond. When you see the cluster, you have to stop it at that point,” Cuomo said. “Our strategy is to crush the cluster and stop the spread, and we’re announcing a special initiative to do just that. Step one, you take the most dramatic action within the cluster itself where you have the highest density of cases. Understanding that the people in that cluster interface with the surrounding communities, take additional action in



the communities surrounding the cluster. Then as a precautionary measure, take action in the communities that are outlying that area.”

The initiative is composed of three steps:

- Take dramatic action within the cluster.

- Take action in the area surrounding the cluster to stop the spread.

- Take precautionary action in the outlying communities.

The initiative will currently apply to clusters in the following areas:

- √ Broome County (one area, yellow)
- √ Brooklyn (one area, red, orange and yellow)
- √ Orange County (one area, red and yellow)
- √ Queens (two areas, red, orange and yellow)
- √ Rockland County (one area, red and yellow)

The initiative will divide clusters and the areas around them into three categories with successively higher restrictions within each one:

Red Zone – Cluster Itself

- √ Houses of worship: 25% capacity, 10 people maximum
- √ Mass gatherings: Prohibited
- √ Businesses: Only essential businesses open
- √ Dining: Takeout only
- √ Schools: Closed, remote only

Orange Zone – Warning Zone

- √ Houses of worship: 33% capacity, 25 people maximum
- √ Mass gatherings: 10 people maximum, indoor and outdoor
- √ Businesses: Closing high-risk, nonessential businesses, such as gyms and personal care
- √ Dining: Outdoor dining only, four person maximum per table
- √ Schools: Closed, remote only

Yellow Zone – Precautionary Zone

- √ Houses of worship: 50% capacity
- √ Mass gatherings: 25 people

maximum, indoor and outdoor

- √ Businesses: Open

- √ Dining: Indoor and outdoor dining, four person maximum per table

- √ Schools: Open with mandatory weekly testing of students and teachers/staff for in-person settings.

The New York State Department of Health will establish a percentage of teachers and students/staff who need to be tested by Friday.

The enforcement of the zones will go into effect as soon as Wednesday and no later than Friday.

“We are going to be providing the local governments with the maps that we did in their areas,” Cuomo said. “We’ll be consulting with them. These were done specifically from the actual case numbers themselves. If there’s some peculiarity, local governments have a comment, we’ll do that today. The rules can go into effect as soon as tomorrow, that’s up to the local government, but no later than Friday. If local government says we want time to get adjusted, fine. Today is Tuesday, get adjusted no later than Friday.”

Cuomo also announced fines for the sponsors of mass gatherings in violation of state public health rules will be increased to \$15,000.

“We see it in places of worship. We’ve seen one church infect people, we’ve seen synagogues infect people, we’ve seen mosques infect people. We had the first hot spot cluster in the United States of America. New Rochelle, a super spreader who attended a temple service and then attended a wedding, and that was it. We were off to the races. So, it’s to be taken very seriously,” Cuomo said. “A mass gathering causes infections. Infections cause a cluster. A cluster causes community spread. That is the natural evolution of things unless we intervene and we stop the cycle. If you just let the cycle run, that is what’s going to happen.”

In terms of education, the governor said, “Testing for schools in the yellow zones starts next week. I am more and more concerned about schools with the more experience we have. The more we get into this the more important I think it is that schools do random testing.”

“Well, students are young and they’re resilient.’ First of all, we don’t really know that. What do we know about this virus? And not only do you have young people in schools, you have teachers. We all think we’re young – I think I’m young – you have teachers and I want to make sure we’re protecting all lives. So, the schools in those yellow zones must do weekly testing.”

“The Department of Health will set a sample number. We want to make sure it’s statistically representative and they’ll set that sample by Friday. If a school needs additional testing equipment, they should contact us – we can to help them. If they want to do pool testing, they should contact us; we can help them.”

“These rules will be in effect for 14 days, and then we’ll see where we are and we’ll see the numbers and we’ll adjust from there.”

New York State United Teachers President Andy Pallotta said, “Erring on the side of caution means closing school buildings when there is serious risk of spreading COVID-19, and we believe the state is taking the right steps by seeking to close schools in these hotspots. At the same time, we are seeking additional details on the state’s testing plan for students and staff in an in-person setting in the outlying areas of these hotspots.”

“These outbreaks have underscored just how real the threat of this virus still is. Protecting the health and safety of students, staff and families must continue to be the top priority as the school year continues.”

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NFMMC doing more COVID-19 community testing

Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center will conduct community testing for COVID-19 at four additional sites beginning this week. The testing is supported by CDBG funds allocated for by the City of Niagara Falls. There will be no charge for city residents.

Testing will take place:

- √ Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

at St. John de LaSalle Church, 8447 Buffalo Ave.

- √ Oct. 13 from 3-6 p.m. at St. Vincent de Paul Church, 1055 North Military Road

- √ Oct. 16 from 1-4 p.m. at Niagara's Choice Federal Credit Union, 3619 Packard Road

People being tested will be required to provide a saliva sample.

To ensure a valid sample eating, drinking, smoking – including vaping – and brushing one’s teeth are prohibited for at least 30 minutes prior to testing.

While not required, preregistration is recommended. To register or for more information, call 278-4496.