

Guidance for Gatherings: Faith-based Communities, Places of Worship and Ceremonies

11/18/2020

Executive Order 20-99, which dialed back on certain activities for a four-week period, does not impact weddings, funerals, or planned religious **services**, but does prohibit any receptions, celebrations, and gatherings connected to these services. Venues hosting planned services permitted under Executive Order 20-99 must comply with the guidance in this document.

Executive Order 20-99

Why are we dialing back on certain activities for four weeks?

Throughout the month of November, the data has made clear with each passing day that we need to take decisive and aggressive action to contain the most recent phase of the pandemic. Minnesota recently topped 200,000 total confirmed COVID-19 cases. It took Minnesota more than 6 months to record 100,000 COVID-19 cases, but only 42 days to add an additional 100,000 new cases. We averaged a state record of almost 6,000 cases per day over the previous week, breaking single-day records for COVID-19 deaths (58) on Nov. 11 and new cases (8,689) on Nov. 14. The Minnesota Department of Health's (MDH) most recent weekly COVID-19 report found that the current average rates of new COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and intensive care unit admissions, and deaths are the highest they have been since the start of the pandemic, far exceeding the numbers we saw in the worst points of our surges in April and May. We need strong action to control our future case numbers.

EO requirements

The full executive order (EO) with all requirements can be found at [Executive Orders from Governor Walz \(https://mn.gov/governor/news/executiveorders.jsp\)](https://mn.gov/governor/news/executiveorders.jsp).

- **Social gatherings prohibited.** Social gatherings are groups of people who are not members of the same household, congregated together for a common or coordinated social, community, or leisure purpose – even if social distancing can be maintained. This prohibition includes planned and spontaneous gatherings as well as public and private gatherings. Most commercial activities are not considered social gatherings, so this change will not impact most industries.

- **Businesses and activities are affected differently.** For a full listing of all business and activity requirements and limitations, see the full executive order at [Executive Orders from Governor Walz \(https://mn.gov/governor/news/executiveorders.jsp\)](https://mn.gov/governor/news/executiveorders.jsp). Many, but not all, businesses will have to pause in-person activities for the next four weeks. Please review the guidance below for industry-specific requirements.
- **Masks and face coverings required.** Executive Order 20-81, requiring face coverings in certain settings, remains in full force and effect.
- **People at higher risk.** All people currently living within the State of Minnesota who are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, as defined by Executive Order 20-55, are strongly urged to stay at home or in their place of residence and follow the provisions of Executive Order 20-55.
- **Work from home.** All people who can work from home must continue to do so.

EO requirements for Guidance for Gatherings: Faith-based Communities, Places of Worship, and Ceremonies

For the next four weeks, this sector will operate under the following provisions:

- **Planned services** or ceremonies in faith-based communities, places of worship, funeral homes and other venues that offer gathering space for weddings and funerals will be able to continue provided these venues have, and implement, a **COVID-19 Preparedness Plan** that follows the requirements for staff, building, and participants to minimize the spread of COVID-19 as described in [Preparedness Plan Requirements for Faith-Based Communities, Places of Worship, Weddings, and Funerals \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/safefaitth.pdf\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/safefaitth.pdf).
- The requirements of staying home if sick or exposed to COVID-19, maintaining distance of at least 6 feet between people from different households, and wearing a mask are critically important at this time. People attending a planned service should not be mingling or socializing prior to or after the service as this type of contact has an increased risk of transmission.
- All **social gatherings** such as private parties, wedding receptions, funeral receptions, celebrations of life milestones (birthdays or retirements), family reunions, gatherings before or after planned religious services and other similar activities must be suspended.
- While planned services may occur during this four-week period, any time people gather they risk exposure to COVID-19. Virtual services are strongly recommended, and in-person services are advised to include the smallest number possible at this time. Congregational singing is very strongly discouraged.

Your health and COVID-19

Any time people are gathering with other people, they are at risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. People with symptoms and without symptoms can spread the virus.

COVID-19 can lead to serious medical conditions and even death for people of all ages. We cannot predict who will become severely ill, although we know that older people and people with underlying health conditions are at higher risk. We do not yet know what the long-term effects of infection from COVID-19 are; even people with mild cases may experience long-term complications.

The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus. The masking, physical distancing, and other steps provided reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19, but do not eliminate the risk entirely. We can all take these actions to protect ourselves, our families, and others throughout our communities:

- Stay home when sick.
- Stay at least 6 feet apart from other people.
- Wear face coverings in indoor businesses and public indoor spaces.
- Wash your hands often.
- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze.

About this guidance

This guidance is for planning or hosting in-person services and ceremonies in faith-based communities, places of worship, funeral homes, and other venues that may offer gathering space for wedding services, funeral services, worship services, rituals, prayer meetings, scripture studies, or similar activities.

Large and small gatherings continue to present significant risk for increasing the spread of COVID-19. All faith communities are encouraged to provide remote services for those members and guests who are at higher risk due to age or underlying health condition and are advised not to attend in-person gatherings.

This guidance is based on space size, predictability and flow of movement, duration of time in designated shared space, and the potential spread of COVID-19 when people gather, even when precautions are taken.

Requirements

- ✓ **Preparedness Plan:** All businesses, organizations, and venues where gatherings take place are required to develop and implement an event specific COVID-19 Preparedness Plan in accordance with the guidance below, and other applicable guidance on the [Stay Safe Minnesota website \(staysafe.mn.gov\)](https://staysafe.mn.gov). This plan must be displayed prominently, so any persons on the premises can easily see this document. Vendors servicing one event may collectively agree to one comprehensive plan, if they so choose.
- ✓ **Social Distancing:** Occupancy must be reduced to allow for the required social distancing of at least 6 feet between people who do not live in the same household at all times.

- ✓ **Masks and face coverings:** As of July 25, 2020, people in Minnesota are required to wear a face covering in all indoor businesses and public indoor spaces, per Executive Order 20-81. The Executive Order includes exemptions for people who are unable to wear or tolerate a face covering due to medical or mental health conditions or other reasons. There are also situations in which a face covering may be temporarily removed, such as when eating or drinking, provided that social distancing is maintained between members of different parties and the face covering is put back on when not eating or drinking. Businesses and venues may choose to have more protective requirements than those in the Executive Order. For more information about the Executive Order and face covering requirements, see [Masks and Face Coverings \(health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/prevention.html#masks\)](https://health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/prevention.html#masks).
- ✓ **Practice good hygiene:** Ensure handwashing facilities and/or hand sanitizer and tissues are available for people to use, and are placed in easily accessible locations.

For leaders, staff, and volunteers

Designate one person from your leadership team or staff to prepare the Plan and ensure that it is understood, publicly posted, and followed by everyone. The Plan must include procedures and instructions on how you will address the following. Detailed information on all of the Preparedness Plan Requirements Guidance for Faith-based Communities, Places of Worship, Weddings, and Funerals can be found at [Stay Safe Minnesota website \(staysafe.mn.gov\)](https://staysafe.mn.gov).

Requirements

1. Implement a health screening protocol to ensure that sick staff stay home. Staff at higher risk are encouraged to work from home.
2. Maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet between staff and mandate face coverings at all times indoors.
3. Wear face coverings or mask, cover coughs and sneezes, and wash hands often.
4. Provide controlled flow of participants as much as possible to avoid congestion points, including upon start and at end of the event.
5. Limit the number of speakers to the smallest number possible and make arrangements so that they avoid close contact (e.g., within 6 feet) with others. Whenever possible, provide individual microphones for multiple speakers. If a microphone must be shared, consider cleaning between speakers or leaving it untouched on a stand.
6. Ensure building safety and proper ventilation protocols. For more details see: [Operational Guidance for Places of Worship \(staysafe.mn.gov/industry-guidance/places-of-worship.jsp\)](https://staysafe.mn.gov/industry-guidance/places-of-worship.jsp).
7. Ensure safe practices and protocols for drop-off, pick-up, and deliveries.
8. Create and follow work and gathering space cleaning and disinfection protocols. Refer to [CDC: Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Home \(cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/disinfecting-your-home.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/disinfecting-your-home.html).
9. Communicate and train all staff on these practices and protocols.

10. Ensure that all activities held in your building(s) follow your practices and protocols (support or community groups, distribution of essential items, etc.).
11. Communicate the steps being taken and the changes to services to all members and participants in order to participate safely and minimize the possible spread of COVID-19.
12. Post signs and instructions to: stay home if you are sick or at high risk, wash hands, cover your cough, wear a facemask, and keep the required 6 feet of social distance. Signage for printing is available at [Materials and Resources for COVID-19 Response \(health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/materials/index.html\)](https://health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/materials/index.html).

For faith community members and participants

Requirements

- Stay home if you or anyone in your household is sick or has symptoms: fever, cough, shortness of breath, chills, muscle aches, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell. Stay home if you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.
- Maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet between people from different households at all times (entering, exiting, sitting, and any activities during the service).
- Wear a face covering or mask in compliance with Executive Order 20-81, (see [Face Covering Requirements under Executive Order 20-81 \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html)), regularly wash or sanitize hands, and cover coughs and sneezes.

Recommendations

- Persons who are at higher risk for severe illness (elderly or underlying health conditions) are strongly encouraged to stay home.
- Participants should understand and agree to follow the COVID-19 Preparedness Plans for the facilities where the service or ceremony will take place.
- Singing/chanting is a higher risk activity, so congregations are strongly encouraged to have pre-recorded music/chants or listen to a cantor who maintains distance from other cantors and participants during the service. See also: [Music Activities and Performances During COVID-19 \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/musicguide.pdf\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/musicguide.pdf).
- Avoid touching items often touched by others if possible. Sanitize high-touch items between multiple users and between services.
- Adapt all practices during the services to avoid close contact and maintain social distancing (greetings, collections, sharing of ceremonial objects and prayer rugs, communion, etc.).
- Event photography: Standing close together is a high-risk activity, even when it is a shorter period of time. Consider taking individual photos and using editing software to combine them into a group photo. See additional recommendations in the [Industry Guidance for Safely Reopening Faith-based Communities, Places of Worship, Weddings, and Funerals \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/safefait.pdf\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/safefait.pdf).

If there is evidence of COVID-19 spread associated with your faith community, you may be advised by your local or state health department to cancel or postpone in-person services until it is safe to return.

Resources

From the State of Minnesota:

- [Preparedness Plan Requirements for Faith-based Communities, Places of Worship, Weddings, and Funerals \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/safefaitth.pdf\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/safefaitth.pdf)
- [Community Settings: COVID-19 \(health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/communities.html\)](http://health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/communities.html)
- [Guidance for Vehicle Gatherings, Parades, and Drive-ins \(health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/vehiclegather.pdf\)](http://health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/vehiclegather.pdf)
- [Guidance for Caring for People in Their Homes \(health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/visitingathome.pdf\)](http://health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/visitingathome.pdf)
- [Operational Guidance for Places of Worship \(staysafe.mn.gov/industry-guidance/places-of-worship.jsp\)](http://staysafe.mn.gov/industry-guidance/places-of-worship.jsp)
- [Stay Safe Guidance for Businesses and Organizations \(staysafe.mn.gov/industry-guidance/index.jsp\)](http://staysafe.mn.gov/industry-guidance/index.jsp)

From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- [Community and Faith-Based Organizations \(cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html\)](http://cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html)
- [Considerations for Communities of Faith \(cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/checklist.html\)](http://cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/checklist.html)
- [Gatherings and Community Events \(cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/index.html\)](http://cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/index.html)
- [Funeral Guidance for Individuals and Families \(cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/funeral-guidance.html\)](http://cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/funeral-guidance.html)



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