

Distance learning extended throughout '19-20 year; more businesses can re-open starting Monday, April 27

Thursday, April 23: A day after announcing a statewide strategy for widespread testing, Gov. Tim Walz outlined next steps for the COVID-19 response in Minnesota on Thursday, April 23. He extended distance learning through the end of the school year, announced a plan for up to 100,000 workers to safely return to their jobs, and explained the different factors determining the gradual re-opening of society in Minnesota.

At his press conference, Walz explained his approach for moving Minnesota forward amid COVID-19. With the health and safety of Minnesotans his top priority, he made clear the “stay home” order remains in effect as the state considers ways to gradually loosen restrictions, starting with settings most conducive to safe practices.

Given those considerations, Walz announced that distance learning will continue through the rest of the 2019-20 school year. The state continues to pursue opportunities to expand technology for students, provide guidance for educators on how to best connect with students, and support families.

“As a former teacher, this is a heartbreaking decision,” Walz said. “I am sorry for all of our students who will miss out on graduations, tournaments, and end-of-year celebrations. While I recognize distance learning is a challenge for many families, it is critical to social distancing in Minnesota and supports the health of Minnesota’s families. We will continue looking for ways to improve the current system and better support our children.”

“Distance learning has created new challenges for all of us, but especially students of color, Native Americans, students in Greater Minnesota, students with disabilities, and low-income families, among others,” said lieutenant governor Peggy Flanagan. “Students are missing their friends and routines, and families are struggling to work while helping their young learners. We can and must do more to ensure that every child is receiving the education they deserve and we will always put the

safety and well-being of our families first.”

As he laid out his approach for gradually loosening restrictions on Minnesota businesses over time, Walz announced his decision to allow certain non-critical businesses to safely return to work, starting on Monday, April 27. Developed in partnerships with hundreds of businesses, labor and worker organizations, and public health experts, this action would allow 80,000 to 100,000 Minnesotans to return to work in industrial, manufacturing, and office settings on Monday, April 27.

“This is a limited first step in the process of safely reopening some businesses and returning Minnesotans to work,” said Department of Employment and Economic Development commissioner Steve Grove. “We will continue to listen to and seek input from business and community leaders and work with public health experts on creative solutions to put more people back to work as safely and quickly as possible.”

Prior to re-opening, businesses must:

- Create, share, and implement a COVID-19 Preparedness Plan that sets out the actions they are taking to ensure social distancing, worker hygiene, and facility cleaning and disinfection necessary to keep workers safe.

- Engage in health screening of employees and ensure that sick employees stay home.

- Continue to work from home whenever possible.

Visit <https://mn.gov/deed/safework/> for more information.

During the stay-at-home order, which lasts until Monday, May 4, Minnesota has worked with hospitals to increase surge capacity; partnered with non-profits and foundations to provide critical support to Minnesotans; learned more about the virus and planned for what comes next; and partnered with Minnesota’s business community to purchase critical equipment, including more than 617,000 face masks, 127,000 face shields, 5.9 million non-latex gloves, 70,000 gowns, and 418,000 N95 respirators, reported the governor’s office.

State, Mayo, U of M announce testing breakthrough

Wednesday, April 22: Gov. Tim Walz, representatives of the state’s health care delivery systems, the Mayo Clinic, and the University of Minnesota (U of M) announced a breakthrough for rapid, widespread testing of COVID-19 in Minnesota on Wednesday, April 22. Standing together at the State’s Emergency Operations Center, they launched a statewide testing strategy to test all symptomatic people, isolate confirmed cases, and expand public health surveillance tools. By building capacity to test as many as 20,000 Minnesotans per day, this increased testing and tracing will help improve control of this pandemic and support the safe re-opening of society.

“When Minnesota faces a challenge, we rise up – together,” Walz said. “I’m proud to partner with Minnesota’s innovative health care systems and leading research institutions to pioneer how states can begin to move forward amid COVID-19.”

The partnership announced today will help to assure that every person in the state with symptoms of COVID-19 gets tested. Funded in part by \$36 million from the COVID-19 Minnesota Fund, the partnership will establish capacity to deliver 20,000 molecular and 15,000 serology tests per day.

“This expanded testing capacity will be transformative to our COVID-19 response, especially for vulnerable populations: individuals living in congregate care settings or experiencing homelessness; communities of color and American Indians; and critical workers,” said lieutenant governor Peggy Flanagan. “By testing more people, we will build a better picture of how COVID-19 is impacting our state and how to combat it. I am grateful to the extraordinary health care professionals at the University of Minnesota, Mayo Clinic, and all of our health systems for making this partnership possible.”

The partnership will improve control of COVID-19 in Minnesota through increased public health surveillance and research. The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and its public health partners will simultaneously expand contact tracing efforts for better control of the infection. The partnership will help to identify and respond to emerging “hotspots” of infection. They will collect data on prevalence, geographic distribution, and barriers to care for the virus, and they will conduct groundbreaking research on COVID-19 to assure that tests are applied according to the best emerging science.

“We are pleased to roll out this new testing effort in partnership with the University of Minnesota and the Mayo Clinic,” health commissioner Jan Malcolm said. “Having this greatly increased testing capacity will improve our understanding of how COVID-19 is spreading in Minnesota, and will provide key data to inform our decisions about how to protect Minnesotans.”

In partnership with MDH, the Mayo Clinic and the U of M will create a central lab to accommodate the expanded testing and a virtual command center in coordination with the health

systems to monitor daily testing needs and coordinate rapid responses to outbreaks. “Mayo Clinic has been leading the nation in COVID-19 testing since the pandemic’s emergence. As always, Mayo Clinic continues to put Minnesota first,” said William Morice, M.D., Ph.D, president of Mayo Clinic Laboratories. “Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Mayo Clinic has prioritized Minnesota’s needs, offering the state unlimited access to Mayo’s unmatched testing capabilities and providing assistance and expertise whenever asked. Mayo’s commitment continues today as we pledge further support for Minnesota’s statewide testing strategy.”

“We are committed to our vital public health obligation of aggressively expanding access to COVID-19 testing throughout the state. It will be core to any effort to safely reopen our state,” said Jakub Tolar, M.D., Ph.D., dean of the University of Minnesota Medical School. “This is a complex health challenge. It is only fitting that two of Minnesota’s pre-eminent research institutions answer the call together in our commitment to tackling this pandemic. We are deeply grateful to Gov. Walz and Minnesota leaders for supporting this testing strategy.”

The expanded testing will include intensive testing of: vulnerable populations, including Minnesotans living in congregate settings and those experiencing homelessness; staff that serve vulnerable populations and health care workers; communities of color and American Indian populations; and workforce for critical infrastructure.

“As an organization that cares for and serves 1.2 million patients and 1.8 million health plan members, HealthPartners applauds Gov. Walz for his leadership in advancing a statewide COVID-19 testing vision,” said Andrea Walsh, president and CEO, HealthPartners. “This partnership will help us identify people who have the infection, prevent spread of disease, and protect our doctors, nurses and care teams. Expanding testing and contact tracing is a necessary building block to help us all work toward re-opening Minnesota.”

“I strongly support a comprehensive statewide SARS-CoV-2 testing program bringing together both core clinical laboratory and public health surveillance expertise,” said Dr. Michael Osterholm, regents professor and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota.

The U of M is the state’s public research university with a presence in every county of the state and is a leader in transformational research into the basic and clinical science of infectious diseases. Mayo Clinic is a leader in developing clinical testing and scaling capacity, and serves as a national reference laboratory and also a leader in clinical and basic infectious disease research.