

The Washington Times

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More governors looking at gradually reopening state economies

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April 23, 2020

More governors, notably Democrats in states such as Michigan, Montana and Pennsylvania, are moving toward gradually reopening their economies as millions of unemployed Americans look for some kind of relief during the coronavirus pandemic.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, who has faced intense criticism for her state's strict stay-at-home order, on Thursday hinted that changes soon could be coming.

"To start to release maybe a few things that pose very little risk — I think it's appropriate to keep doing that assessment and we may have some announcements in the coming days," she said on CNN.

Congress recently approved rescue legislation that provides people an additional \$600 per week in unemployment benefits and allows "gig" and contract workers such as [Uber](#) drivers to file for benefits they normally are not entitled to, leaving states to deal with the crush of demand.

"This is an impossible problem that they handed to the states," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Thursday. "It's not going to cost you any money because you will get the check. I know you want it today, but you will get it and when you get it it's the same dollar amount as if you got it today."

Mr. Cuomo said he isn't seeing hospitalization and infection rates decline to the point where New York, the hardest-hit U.S. state in the COVID-19 outbreak, can start reopening.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper said as much as well, announcing Thursday that he is extending his state's stay-at-home order until May 8 despite calls to allow some businesses to reopen.

"It's clear that we are flattening the curve, but our state is not ready to lift restrictions yet," Mr. Cooper said. "I will not risk the health of our people or our hospitals, and easing these restrictions now would do that."

But other fellow Democratic governors have started taking steps toward reopening.

Montana Gov. Steve Bullock said this week that businesses in the state will be able to reopen next week under certain conditions, saying the state has made enough progress in the pandemic to allow a stay-at-home order to expire.

“Our new normal is going to look different. This virus isn’t gone from Montana,” said Mr. Bullock, a former 2020 presidential candidate who is now running for Senate.

The state’s stay-at-home order will expire Sunday for individuals and Monday for businesses. Places of worship can open on Sunday with proper social distancing measures.

Retailers can reopen Monday if they limit their capacity, and restaurants and bars can start offering in-person service on May 4. Places such as gyms and movie theaters will stay closed.

This week, Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf set a May 8 target date for parts of the state economy to reopen, starting with the north-central and northwest regions that haven’t been hit as hard.

“As I’ve said before, we will not just be flipping a switch and going from closed to open, and ultimately the virus is going to set the timeline,” he said.

Republican Party of Pennsylvania Chairman Lawrence Tabas said Mr. Wolf’s announcement was a positive step after the governor had previously been relying on his own “secretive shutdown criteria.”

“Pennsylvania is already further behind neighboring states in terms of getting our economy back because of his overly broad shutdown,” Mr. Tabas said in a statement to The Washington Times. “We have a lot of work to do, but Republicans stand ready to get Pennsylvania working again.”

A handful of Republican governors overseeing Southeastern states such as South Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia announced plans this week to relax some of their states’ restrictions on businesses and individuals.

Those red states aren’t necessarily adding “pressure” on blue states to get moving as much as states are simply learning from one another, said Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute think tank.

“Governors can make mistakes, but then by the actions of other states, they can learn how to make corrections,” Mr. Edwards said. “The federal government should stay out. As states each start opening up in different ways, they will monitor each other and learn what works and what doesn’t.”

The National Governors Association, which is calling on Congress to pass an additional \$500 billion in relief for states and territories, laid out a detailed “road map to recovery” for the country’s governors this week.

The report calls on states to expand testing capacity and collaborate with neighboring states, while setting clear public health metrics and benchmarks to hit when crafting plans to reopen stores.

“Opening prematurely — or opening without the tools in place to rapidly identify and stop the spread of the virus — could send states back into crisis mode, push health systems past capacity, and force states back into strict social distancing measures,” the report said.

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican who is chairman of the bipartisan group, plans to outline Friday details on how and when the state can start to reopen.