

Massachusetts businesses told to reduce foot traffic after Christmas

By Colin A. Young
State House News Service

Fearing that the holiday season could fuel an explosion of COVID-19 cases that the state's health care system would not be able to handle, Gov. Charlie Baker on Tuesday announced new restrictions that seek to limit the number of people in most businesses, public spaces, and private homes for at least two weeks after Christmas.

Starting Saturday and running until at least noon on Jan. 10, restaurants, movie theaters, performance venues, casinos, offices, places of worship, retail businesses, fitness centers, health clubs, libraries, golf facilities, driving and flight schools, arcades, museums, and "sectors not otherwise addressed" must limit their customer capacity to a maximum of 25 percent.

The capacity limits were part of an emergency order Baker issued Tuesday.

The limit for outdoor gatherings will be lowered from 50 to 25, and the limit for indoor gatherings – including events and public spaces – will be 10, which matches the limit for indoor gatherings at private residences. Unless it would risk the patient's health, all hospitals must also postpone or cancel all non-essential inpatient elective invasive procedures beginning Saturday.

Baker said the idea behind his newest restrictions, which will be layered on top of the existing orders he has already issued, is to "pause activity and reduce mobility" for

the two weeks immediately following Christmas in an attempt to prevent a significant increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations that could undermine the state's hospital systems.

"I think [the] most important thing we want out of this is to make absolutely clear to people that the best and most safe thing we can all do for the next few weeks is to spend as much time with those we live with as possible and to not treat the period between Christmas and New Year's the way we normally do, which is a constant race to connect with, catch up with, hang out with, grab a drink with, grab a meal with, all those people you haven't seen since the last time you saw them last year," Baker said Tuesday. "And I think we all get the fact that that's a tough message. But it's the right message for the moment."

As of Monday, the seven-day average number of new COVID-19 cases in Massachusetts was 3,489 – that's up 90 percent from the seven-day average of 1,837 cases as of Nov. 8, the date Baker highlighted in his order. The seven-day weighted average of the positive test rate was 5.94 percent as of Monday, compared to 2.7 percent on Nov. 8. Since Thanksgiving, the number of people requiring hospital care for COVID-19 in Massachusetts has more than doubled from 986 patients to 1,991 patients.

"Our hospitals are now under significant pressure and we're heading toward another period, this holiday stretch, where we're likely to see another significant increase in cases and hospitalizations unless everybody plays a very different game than the one we all played at Thanksgiving," Baker said. "As a result, we think it's appropriate to take action now to slow that spread. And we must do so in a way that can avoid overriding our hospital system."

Baker has been concerned about the possibility of the December holidays – Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa and New Year's Eve/Day

– leading to a repeat of the spike in COVID-19 cases that Massachusetts saw in the aftermath of Thanksgiving. On Monday, he said he was “basically begging everyone to stay within their immediate household” for Christmas and New Year’s.

While he has been urging residents to alter their traditions and celebrate the holidays differently for this one year, Baker said Tuesday that he decided to make his newest round of restrictions effective the day after Christmas – and therefore after many of the gatherings he is concerned about will have taken place – so he would not disrupt the religious celebration of Christmas and because he hopes many people will physically attend Mass, which is Christmas tradition for some Christians.

“Honestly, the main reason we picked the day after Christmas instead of the day before Christmas was we know that many people, hopefully, will participate in a faith service of some kind – safely – on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day,” the governor said. “Now, it’s perfectly possible to do that safely. And we would hope people would follow the rules, follow the guidance, do the things we’ve talked about if they choose to do that.”

Somerville Mayor Joe Curtatone, whose city took a more cautious approach to its economic reopening than the state as a whole, was not impressed with Baker’s newest restrictions Tuesday.

“The Governor and Secretary Sudders have sounded the alarm for help from retired healthcare workers because our healthcare system is showing signs of strain,” he tweeted. “So why the decision [sic] to just roll back the capacity for indoor business activity to 25%?”

Christopher Carlozzi, Massachusetts director of the National Federation of Independent Business, called it “unfortunate” that Baker chose to further reduce capacity for small

businesses, many of which have “followed the rules and dutifully adhered to all state guidelines,” when the governor has repeatedly cited private gatherings as the primary driver of COVID-19 spread.

“These businesses have overcome the odds and survived despite facing a months-long shutdown, fewer customers, increased restrictions, and higher operating costs, but the new capacity limits may result in their doors shutting permanently,” he said. “The new restrictions will hit struggling restaurants the hardest, an industry already ravaged by the pandemic.”

The governor acknowledged Tuesday that the two-week reduction in capacity will be tough for some businesses to manage, especially restaurants and entertainment businesses, and he said that he plans to detail “a significant economic relief fund for the commonwealth’s small businesses that will be most negatively affected by these decisions” at a press conference Wednesday.

“We know what this means for a lot of our small businesses, especially those in the restaurant and indoor entertainment venue activity, which is why we’ll be back here tomorrow with a plan for them,” Baker said.

Earlier Tuesday, the Massachusetts Coalition for Health Equity – a group that includes more than 20 organizations and almost 300 physicians – called for Baker to close casinos, movie theaters, gyms, places of worship and to limit restaurants to carry-out only, among other steps.

Baker said Tuesday afternoon that he thinks his latest strategy is a better one.

“Our view is based on a lot of the data we saw. You get down below 30 percent [capacity] and you start having a pretty significant impact on infection rates, generally, and I think for many businesses the pure closure of the operation requires shutting all kinds of things down that are then hard to start

up again at some point later on," he said. He added, "I think this is a much more appropriate way to deal with it than to just lock everything down and tell everybody to stay home."

Tuesday was the second time this month that Baker has announced new, more restrictive measures to combat the growing second surge of COVID-19. On Dec. 8, Baker announced that the state would move back a step in his phased reopening plan effective Dec. 13.

That rollback meant capacity limits were lowered across an array of businesses, some indoor recreation venues were ordered to close again, and rules around mask-wearing and dining out were tightened.