

Shut it down, start over, do it right

An open letter to America's decision makers, on behalf of health professionals across the country.

Dear decision makers,

Hit the reset button.

Of all the nations in the world, we've had the most deaths from COVID-19. At the same time, we're in the midst of "reopening our economy," exposing more and more people to coronavirus and watching numbers of cases -- and deaths -- [skyrocket](#).

In March, people went home and stayed there for weeks, to keep themselves and their neighbors safe. You didn't use the time to set us up to defeat the virus. And then you started to reopen anyway, and too quickly.

Right now we are on a path to lose [more than 200,000 American lives](#) by November 1st. Yet, in many states people can drink in bars, get a haircut, eat inside a restaurant, get a tattoo, get a massage, and do myriad other normal, pleasant, but non-essential activities.

Get our priorities straight.

More than 117,000 Americans had died of COVID-19 by mid-June. If our response had been as effective as Germany's, estimates show that we would have had only 36,000 COVID-19 deaths in that period in the United States. If our response had been as effective as South Korea, Australia, or Singapore's, fewer than 2,000 Americans would have died. We [could have prevented 99% of those COVID-19 deaths](#). But we didn't.

The best thing for the nation is not to reopen as quickly as possible, it's to save as many lives as possible. And reopening before suppressing the virus isn't going to help the economy. Economists have gone on record saying that the only way to ["restore the economy is to address the pandemic itself,"](#) pointing out that until we find a way to

boost testing and develop and distribute a vaccine, open or not, people will not be in the mood to participate.

Listen to the experts.

Public health professionals have made clear that even after we've contained the virus by staying at home, in order to reopen American cities and towns safely, we will need:

– Enough daily testing capacity to test everyone with flu-like symptoms plus anyone they have been in close contact with over the last 2 weeks (at least 10 additional tests per symptomatic person). We currently have only [35% of the testing capacity](#) we need to meet that threshold. The more people get sick, the more testing is required.

– A [workforce of contact tracers](#) large enough to trace all current cases. That's [210,000](#) more contact tracers than we had in April, but the number keeps going up as infections rise. Most states [are far short of](#) the number of contact tracers they need.

In addition, we need [more personal protective equipment](#) (PPE) to keep essential workers like health professionals, emergency responders, and grocery store clerks safe.

Shut it down now, and start over.

Non-essential businesses should be closed. Restaurant service should be limited to take-out. People should stay home, going out only to get food and medicine or to exercise and get fresh air. Masks should be mandatory in all situations, indoors and outdoors, where we interact with others.

We need that protocol in place until case numbers recede to a level at which we have the capacity to effectively test and trace. Then, and only then, we can try a little more opening, one small step at a time.

You should bar non-essential interstate travel. When people travel freely between states, the good numbers in one state can go bad quickly.

If you don't take these actions, the consequences will be measured in widespread suffering and death.

We need you to lead.

Tell the American people the truth about the virus, even when it's hard. Take bold action to save lives – even when it means shutting down again.

Unleash the resources needed to contain the virus: massively ramping up testing, building the necessary infrastructure for effective contact tracing, and providing a safety net for those who need it.

Many of the actions of our government thus far have fallen short of what the moment demands. Mr. Trump, federal administration, honorable governors: we remind you that history has its eyes on you.

Sincerely,

Matthew Wellington

Public Health Campaigns Director, U.S. PIRG

U.S. PIRG, the federation of state Public Interest Research Groups, is a consumer group that stands up to powerful interests whenever they threaten our health and safety, our financial security, or our right to fully participate in our democratic society.

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