



Montana Hospital Association Statewide Shelter in Place Recommendation

March 26, 2020

The membership of the Montana Hospital Association, which includes hospitals, long-term care providers, home health agencies, hospice providers, continuing care communities and physicians, recommends a statewide “shelter in place declaration” to protect the lives of all Montanans and the livelihood of our state’s economy.

Healthcare organizations are on the frontlines of care delivery and have taken extensive efforts to protect patients, caregivers and to serve as the community’s safety-net. The potential explosive growth in the spread of the COVID-19 virus is a reality that cannot be ignored. At this point, Montana has the potential to contain spread of the virus and avoid countless deaths and long-term economic harm to our state.

As healthcare leaders we are called into our professions to care for our neighbors and do no harm. The impact of this disease and its high mortality rate, coupled with the experience of other states and appropriate medical guidance, have shaped our decision-making in calling for this declaration.

Currently, hospitals have canceled elective surgeries, face critical shortages of personal protective equipment and blood products as well as staffing challenges. The ability to fight a prolonged battle against the virus is pushing our nation’s healthcare system to its limits. To protect the lives we are called to treat, the need for this declaration cannot be underscored enough. We do not take this recommendation lightly. In fact, we fully understand its impact on the lives of all Montanans.

Our members are experiencing immense pressure to protect our communities along with the significant and perhaps irreversible financial harm to hospitals and healthcare providers across the state. A “shelter in place” declaration has the potential to quarantine the virus and permit public health to test and track those infected and shorten its lifespan in Montana. This effort will also blunt the economic hit to our state.

If we do not take this action and the virus takes hold in our communities, we will place vulnerable lives at risk. Montana’s elderly residents, among the largest in the nation as a percent of our total population, face the highest death rate. A large percentage of our elderly populations reside in our most rural communities. While our rural hospitals have taken extraordinary measures to prepare for COVID-19 in their communities, these facilities are simply not equipped to handle a high volume of acute cases.

Our Recommendation for the Health of Montana

The membership of the Montana Hospital Association supports a statewide shelter in place to protect the personal and financial health of our state. We recognize this is not an easy decision. However, faced with the experience of other states, we cannot ignore the reality of the COVID-19 virus' impact if not effectively contained. Additionally, we call on our state's business leaders to support the health of all Montanans and the long-term economic future of our state. If we do not act swiftly and boldly, we will give the virus an opportunity to sever our healthcare safety net and the economic foundations of our economy.

We believe an important balance must be achieved with healthcare, business and political leaders, coming together to support the lives and livelihood of our state.

The shelter-in-place declaration should include, at a minimum:

- Closure of non-essential businesses. The Governor shall define the essential business using U.S. Department of Homeland Security guidelines, or others as appropriate.
- Six-foot distancing enforced in essential business services.
- Essential travel only. This includes travel by car, motorcycle, scooter, train, air or public transit. All travel must comply with the six-foot distancing rule. Anyone arriving in the state by commercial air must also comply upon arrival.
- For patients who are 65 or older, have compromised immune systems or underlying conditions:
 - Remain indoors; any outdoor activities should be solitary.
 - Vulnerable populations should not visit homes with more than one person inside.
 - Strictly follow the six-foot distance rule.
- A robust enhanced communications effort shall accompany this declaration.

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