

State ramps up coronavirus response; Evers seeking agencies' input on legislation to address outbreak

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To help workers impacted by the growing coronavirus pandemic, Gov. Tony Evers has called on lawmakers to immediately repeal a one-week delay in collecting unemployment benefits — something Republicans approved nearly a decade ago.

Evers also ordered bars and restaurants to be closed to in-house patrons as of 5 p.m. yesterday as part of the state's escalating response to the outbreak. He also issued a new ban on gatherings of 10 or more people after prohibiting groups of 50 or more just the day before.

The Tavern League knocked the order closing bars, saying there would be large swaths of noncompliance because the directive came so late.

The orders came as Health Services Secretary Adrea Palm said there is now evidence of community spread in Dane, Kenosha and Milwaukee counties. That means some of those testing positive haven't had any exposure to a known case or traveled somewhere where someone has tested positive.

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She also said the state will begin prioritizing testing because the influx in demand has led to a shortage of the ingredients needed to complete them.

The top priority for testing will be those who are critically ill and receiving intensive care or are hospitalized with coronavirus symptoms and exposure to a confirmed case.

The second tier will be those who are hospitalized or health care workers with an unexplained fever or signs of a lower respiratory tract illness.

Tests for those who don't meet those criteria will result in longer waits for results.

Palm acknowledged the steps to limit social interactions are "unprecedented."

"But we need to do this to help limit the spread of COVID-19," she said on a conference call.

The Evers administration has also begun asking agencies for input on a possible legislative package in response to the pandemic, according to a copy of a document a source provided to WisPolitics.com.

The questions in the document include asking agencies to identify a "current law and problem." Other questions include a recommendation for action, the fiscal effect and drafting instructions, along with parties that would be affected.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, told WisPolitics.com he spoke to the gov on Friday and Chief of Staff Maggie Gau on Monday to say "let's all get on the same page here and figure out what are the items we need to address, agency by agency."

Fitzgerald said he wanted to see what passes Congress first and the effect of that before deciding what state package could be needed in response to the pandemic.

"I'm more concerned with the nuts and bolts of the agencies and the things they're coming up with where they feel like we need some leeway here to deal with an issue that's emerged," Fitzgerald said in the interview. "That's the problem that's popped up that we see an issue here, we're not even sure if we need legislative relief, or rule or can the governor with his emergency clause make the move."

Fitzgerald said he's also been in contact with Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, about possible legislative action.

A Vos spokeswoman didn't immediately return requests for comment.