

The Massachusetts Way Forward

There are several details that employers will look for in the state's reopening strategy announcement planned for Monday, May 18. While protecting public health is the primary concern, businesses will look for additional information on the reopening phases and triggers, a statewide goal on testing, the plan for using federal childcare funds, the public transit approach, and whether additional guidance is forthcoming.

Information

The state will have a four-phase reopening, however, there are still no clear triggers for each phase, including phase one. The state should publish the set of metrics it is tracking and the performance necessary to trigger each reopening phase. For example, what measure(s) will the state use to determine it is safe to move into phase two? As a part of the more detailed reopening strategy, the state should incorporate a plan to protect our most vulnerable residents that is based on demographic data and outcomes for those who have tested positive.

This information is critical not only for employers and employees who are planning their own futures but also to build public confidence that the reopening is based on data points and protecting public health.

Testing

Testing "anyone, anytime" requires a coordinated state effort to communicate and provide widespread access to affordable testing for all residents. Some employers will want to conduct testing for employees and are capable of funding and managing programs. However, employer testing should be one aspect of the statewide testing strategy. Relying only on employers to coordinate a response may result in haphazard testing for enormous swaths of the population including retired people, students, and those who became unemployed as a result of the economic shutdown.

A statewide strategy should set a goal that a certain share of the population undergo a serology test and use those results to influence the ongoing reopening strategy. The state should also oversee communicating how, where, and when to get tests; detail the statewide capacity to manufacture, administer, and analyze tests; and remove legal or regulatory barriers to ramping up testing capacity.

Childcare

Childcare should be considered a key element of the infrastructure needed to reopen, not just another industry. Massachusetts received \$45 million in funding from the CARES Act Child Care and Development Block Grant and can use these funds for a number of purposes. Other states have used these funds in various ways, including:

- Subsidize and sustain providers during the remaining economic shutdown, including for payroll so that the workforce stays attached to the providers.
- Provide bonuses or other pay incentives to the workforce providing childcare during early phases of reopening.
- Subsidize the cost of complying with PPE and hygiene requirements and assist with access to PPE and related needs.
- Ensure providers have access to mental health supports.
- Conduct testing for the workforce.

Transportation

Many employers in professional services and similar industries have already announced they will encourage those who are able to work from home to do so for a longer period of time than required by the state. However, relying on work from home as the primary way to manage public transportation demand and capacity could lead to problems. There are hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts workers who cannot work from home, as demonstrated by the unprecedented unemployment filings since March. Those who cannot work from home include nurses, bank tellers, waitstaff, construction workers, museum guides, gym operators, janitorial employees, retail staff, casino workers, dentists, and more.

As workplaces reopen, these workers will need reliable and adequate public transportation that protects their health and safety. Information on how and when service will run should be clear, comprehensive, and made available as part of a robust communications plan.

Liability and Guidance

Clear guidance for employers and businesses remains a primary concern. While the minimum requirements described earlier this week provide some information, these can be strengthened with guidance – not additional requirements or regulations. For example, guidance confirming that a sink in a restroom is adequate to fulfill the requirement that employers have handwashing capabilities could clarify future questions.