

Raimondo: New Restrictions Are 'wake up Call'; Gov. Orders 11 P.m. Closing Time For Bars As State Reports 1 Death, 91 More Cases

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Providence Journal

August 6, 2020 Thursday

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Section: A; Pg. 1

Length: 866 words

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Body

PROVIDENCE — New travel restrictions that four Northeast states have placed on Rhode Islanders should be a “wake up call” prompting local residents to do better in containing transmission of coronavirus, Gov. Gina Raimondo said at her weekly news conference Wednesday.

And with that in mind, Raimondo announced a series of new actions among the most severe since the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic in April and May that she said are intended to allow

schools to soon reopen and keep businesses going.

Among the actions:

• Establishment of a state police “crush COVID unit” charged with enforcing mask-wearing and crowd size, currently no greater than 15, at social gatherings, inside or outdoors. Residents who wish to report violations can call a state police tip line, (401) 764-5554.

• Possible fines of \$500 per person at gatherings that state or local police find are violating regulations.

• Starting Friday, no bar areas in restaurants will be allowed to stay open past 11 p.m. The governor said inspections last weekend found about 20% of bars were not complying with state rules on separating bartenders from customers.

• Beginning on Sunday, travelers from 33 states who intend to stay at hotels or in rented properties in Rhode Island must sign a certificate of compliance indicating they will quarantine for 14 days or they have proof of a negative COVID test within 72 hours of crossing the border. Hotels and property owners who allow out-of-towner stays without the certificate will be subject to unspecified penalties.

• National Guard units and Rhode Island Department of Health employees will again greet passengers arriving at Green State Airport and disembarking at train stations, advising them of quarantine regulations. New signage will be placed.

• Commencing Wednesday afternoon, Rhode Islanders looking to travel to states that require a negative test to avoid a quarantine can go to portal.ri.gov to sign up for a rapid test at the Rhode Island Convention Center. Raimondo said the state would “try as hard as we can” to get test results in 24 to 48 hours.

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In outlining the new measures, Raimondo cited New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts placing Rhode Island in "the red zone" of states whose residents are not welcome.

"It should be a wake up call for the people of Rhode Island that we need to do better," the governor said during the conference at Veterans Memorial Auditorium, the usual venue. "We need to clamp down and get more serious."

"This is a turning point," said Health Department Director Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott.

If there is a silver lining, Raimondo said, it's that "there will be fewer people coming to Rhode Island and fewer of us traveling," presumably reducing the risk of transmission.

Raimondo reserved some of her strongest language for bar-goers and restaurant and bar owners where violations have been observed for weeks. The state will be "out in force" starting Friday to enforce the new 11 p.m. closing curfew, she said, and if the situation continues, she threatened to shut down establishments.

"I have been trying week after week to avoid this," she said. Based on what unfolds starting Friday, the verdict on shutdowns will be returned at next Wednesday's conference, she said.

Asked why 11 p.m. had been chosen as the new closing hour, Raimondo said there was no firm science involved but that beyond that hour, as people continue to drink, inhibitions loosen and, although she did not phrase it this way, some people become inebriated. She said there have been several reports of customers in the midnight hour acting "belligerently" when asked to comply with the rules.

In general, she urged people to "be a little considerate. How hard is it to wear a mask? To keep a gathering to 15 people?" She added: "I know it's a pain. I wish there were a way around it. But it's a brutal reality."

Raimondo also asked Rhode Islanders to dust off the contact lists some were keeping in the spring, when the state faced a public health emergency.

More uplifting news came Wednesday regarding testing. With the addition of two new laboratories, including Dominions Diagnostics in East Greenwich, Raimondo said the goal of results no later than 48 hours after samples are taken is within reach.

Also, all Rhode Islanders between the ages of 18 and 39 are now eligible for free asymptomatic tests. These younger adults can sign up starting Wednesday night at portal.ri.gov.

The Rhode Island Department of Health on Wednesday reported one coronavirus-related death and 91 new coronavirus cases. There were 84 new positive tests on Tuesday, and seven added to previous days' totals.

That brings the total toll in the state to 1,012 deaths and 19,481 known cases.

There were 79 patients with coronavirus in Rhode Island hospitals on Monday, the most recent date for which data were available, down from 80 the day before. Fourteen were in intensive care five were on ventilators.

There were 3,017 negative test results reported Tuesday, for a 2.7% positive rate. If only those testing negative for the first time are counted, the positive rate is 6.0%.

The seven-day average of new positive tests dropped slightly, to 90.4.

Graphic

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