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County of LUZERNE
P E N N S Y L V A N I A
ESTABLISHED 1786

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County Manager

SHARON LAWRENCE
Clerk of County Council

May 22nd, 2020

The Honorable Tom Wolf
Governor of Pennsylvania
Room 225 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

RE: Luzerne County Movement to Yellow Phase

Dear Governor Wolf:

This letter is to thank you, your office, Department of Health and all of the other individuals who provided input into the decision to move Luzerne County from the red color status to the yellow color status effective on Friday 5/29/2020. This decision will have a very positive effect for the residents of Luzerne County.

As you are well aware, the county had a very significant number of cases of the COVID-19 virus. The citizens of the county were severely impacted by the positive cases. The county and its residents answered the call of the Commonwealth to “Stay Home/Stay Safe.” It is through those efforts that the county was able to flatten the curve to protect their communities.

The county had a number of 414 cases per fourteen day moving average just over one month ago. Through the efforts of many hard working and dedicated people, the county was able to significantly lower the number to 81 cases per fourteen day moving average. This was a very significant accomplishment.

The county will continue its efforts to proceed to the green color status. The county’s economy needs to be re-opening so that all businesses can operate within the specified guidelines. The work will continue to provide the county residents with a safe and healthy environment.

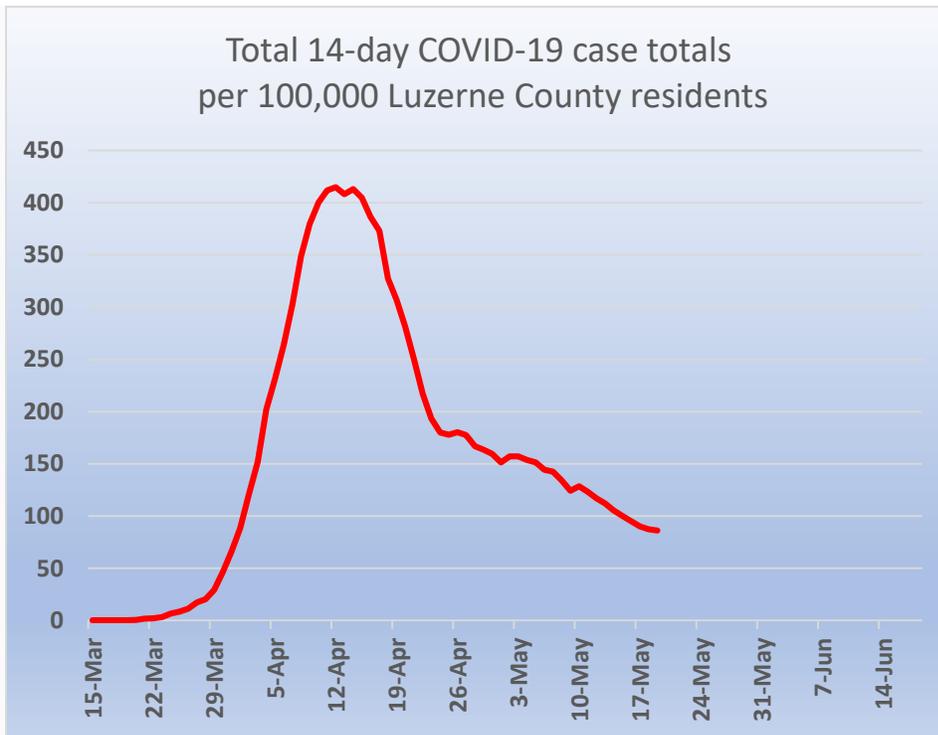
The County submits this information to highlight some of the steps that were taken to transition the county from the red color status to yellow color status:

STATISTICS

Luzerne County's positive COVID-19 cases are quickly and consistently trending downward

Utilizing Governor Tom Wolf's Process to Reopening Plan, a target goal for moving to the Yellow Phase has been set at having fewer than 50 new confirmed cases per 100,000 residents reported in the previous 14 days. Luzerne County has a population of approximately 317,000 citizens. Therefore to meet this criteria, Luzerne County must have less than 158 cases within the previous 2 weeks.

A review of the Luzerne County positive cases show a strong downward trend and currently shows that between May 6 and May 19, the County had 274 new cases over this two-week period. This places Luzerne County at approximately 86 new confirmed cases per 100,000 residents. While this number is admittedly higher than the 50 that is being sought, this number is significantly down from the over 414 new cases that the County was hit with just a month ago.



Based on the above statistics, Luzerne County has heeded the call and adhered to the quarantine. The County sees no reason why this downward trend would not continue in the upcoming few days and therefore, based on the above, Luzerne County is on track to warrant a reopening.

In addition, as noted by the state statistics, Luzerne County has a significant number of cases in our local Nursing Home facilities. Unfortunately, the patients in these facilities are the most vulnerable to the coronavirus. However, we are committed to assisting them and have provided PPE and hand sanitizer to protect the residents and employees.

TESTING CAPABILITY

Luzerne County has the necessary testing capabilities to assist its citizens

Currently, Luzerne County has 10 COVID-19 testing sites including the Mass Testing Site set and staffed by the Department of Health, Pennsylvania National Guard and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency at the Mohegan Sun Arena. These testing sites have proven to be extremely successful and accessible. Currently, these sites are under capacity and have the ability to quickly accommodate any citizen of Northeastern Pennsylvania who shows symptoms.

Even when the mass testing site at the Mohegan Sun Arena closes, the other testing locations in Luzerne County are prepared to meet the demands of testing should a surge occur. Luzerne County is well equipped to provide the necessary testing to its citizens.

MEDICAL CAPABILITY

Healthcare system capability remains within current and forecasted surge capacity

Luzerne County enjoys the services of three major healthcare networks as well as many independent medical providers. Our healthcare system networks, Geisinger, Lehigh Valley Health Care and Commonwealth Health operate the County's four hospitals. These healthcare networks have been a key partner to the County throughout the pandemic, providing recommendations and support.

Our healthcare providers are confident that they have the ability and capability to handle cases that arise. Our Hospitals are not at capacity and are resuming elective surgery. Regional hospital beds, ICU beds, ventilators and Personal Protective Equipment are all available within each healthcare system.

Dr. Julio Ramos, the President of the Luzerne Medical Society, stated that the Society had a meeting and are in support of a plan to move the County from red to yellow as long as the County's population continues to adhere to strict CDC guidelines such as social distancing and hand washing.

The Luzerne County Health Crisis Team has been meeting virtually on a weekly basis since the end of March. The Health Care Community has done outstanding work in planning and implementing procedures to combat the virus. The facilities have the necessary PPE, equipment, and outstanding staff to battle this disease. They are currently able to begin to phase-in surgeries and procedures that had been postponed. The providers are great partners with the county and will continue to work with our community and citizens.

The County's robust medical community has pivoted to address the virus and is prepared and able to handle any potential future surges.

READINESS OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Local Businesses will take the “Luzerne County Pledge” for safety

The Luzerne County business community is ready to take the necessary steps to open and keep their patrons safe. Our 4 Chambers of Commerce have partnered with Luzerne County to create a website where a business can review all Federal, CDC and State guidelines as well as find vendors for the purchase of personal protective equipment. The website is LuzerneCountyReady.org. Upon review each business will take the “LUZERNE COUNTY PLEDGE” that they have read and will comply with the necessary safety precautions. This pledge will be posted in the front window of each store showing citizens their commitment.

Pre-pandemic, the Luzerne County economy showed steady growth. A safe reopening of Luzerne County will support our small businesses, get residents back to work, and will get the County back to moving forward economically.

RESPONSIBILITY OF CITIZENS

Luzerne County’s citizens have taken and will continue to take safety seriously

Luzerne County’s success in fighting this pandemic can be traced to one major factor – the cooperation, diligence and sacrifice of the Luzerne County citizen. Only a month ago, Luzerne County’s positive coronavirus numbers were some of the highest in state. These numbers saw a rapid decline once the severity of the virus became evident. Public gatherings, holiday celebrations, and scholastic events were cancelled in the call for public safety. The hard decisions and time spent in quarantine have paid dividends for the health of all Luzerne County citizens.

Should Luzerne County move to the Yellow Phase, this persistence and conscientiousness will continue by its citizens. They have been made aware of the concerns, have listened, and are ready to continue to do what it takes to defeat this virus even in the next phase.

ENFORCEMENT OF VIOLATIONS

Luzerne County municipalities stand ready to assist where necessary

Each Luzerne County municipality has empowered its police and code enforcement to take the steps necessary to maintain the safety and security of its citizens. The City of Hazleton showed the determination of the leaders of Luzerne County by enforcing a curfew that contributed to Hazleton’s drop in positive cases. Our District Attorney’s office has an Assistant District Attorney on duty at all times to assist with answering legal questions pertaining to the criminal aspect of any offense. All business owners will be aware that the Governor has the tools, other than criminal citations, to enforce the emergency order.

In conclusion, Luzerne County has arguably come the farthest of any County in regard to this virus. We have worked hard and finally see a light at the end of the tunnel. For the reasons stated above, please consider moving Luzerne County to the Yellow phase.