

Governor's COVID briefings

Masks are now mandatory

by Joseph Gresser

Governor Phil Scott's order calling for Vermonters to wear masks in public, indoors and out, when they can't stay at least six feet away from other people went into effect Saturday.

Everyone over the age of two is required to wear a face covering unless a medical condition prevents them from doing so, Governor Scott said. He said no one will check on a person's health status to preserve medical privacy.

At his press briefing Friday, the Governor announced a plan to send enough cloth masks for a quarter of the population of every town in the state. Distribution of masks will be in the hands of emergency management personnel in those towns, he said.

August 1 also marked a change in the number of people allowed in commercial establishments around the state. So far, stores and other businesses have been able to admit only 25 percent of the legal occupancy rate.

Governor Scott ordered that amount doubled to 50 percent of capacity.

All schools in Vermont will be opening on September 8, the Governor said. That includes independent, private, and public schools, he said.

Health Commissioner Mark Levine spoke Tuesday about concerns raised in a research letter published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association's* publication *JAMA Pediatrics*.

The letter said a group of 145 patients in Chicago who tested positive for COVID were checked for the virus' RNA. Young children between ages one and five were found to have more RNA in their upper respiratory system than older

children or adults, according to the letter.

Dr. Levine said the study leaves a lot of unanswered questions.

For instance, he said, it considers the amount of coronavirus RNA not the live virus itself. The letter gives no indication if the RNA is able to infect another person.

"It's hard to know what to conclude from this study," Dr. Levine said. "Certainly one can conclude children can become infected with the virus, which we've known, and they might spread the virus, if they harbor a lot.

"But we have to balance that consideration with the fact that observational studies worldwide, discussed here previously, indicate children don't spread the virus very efficiently."

Dr. Levine said the results of the *JAMA* study will have to be replicated lest it leads scientists to draw premature conclusions.

He said he continues to stand by his belief that schools in Vermont can open safely given the amount of testing done in the state and the rate of positive results.

Dr. Levine said the current rate of positive results per test is around five-tenths of a percent in Vermont currently.

Schools are a microcosm of the community, he said. If people continue to take care to avoid spreading the virus, the schools will remain safe for students, he said.

The state's Department of Corrections ran into a serious problem when inmates being housed at a privately run prison in Mississippi were found to have contracted COVID-19.

A van left the Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility in Tutwiler, Mississippi, on July 27, according to Corrections Commissioner Jim Baker. It drove

straight through to Vermont arriving at the Marble Valley Correctional Facility in Rutland the next day.

There, as are all incoming prisoners, the six passengers were placed in an isolation area and tested for COVID. All six tested positive for the illness.

Although CoreCivic, the company that operates the prison, signed a contract saying they are required to treat inmates from Vermont as if they were in a Vermont facility, it used the Mississippi protocol, which calls for testing only those who showed symptoms of COVID.

Vermont corrections authorities scrambled to get all of Vermont's inmates tested, Commissioner Baker said in a press conference Monday, but found it difficult because the state has limited resources compared to Vermont.

So far, he said, 84 inmates have gotten positive test results out of a Vermont population of around 219. Those inmates are being housed separately from other prisoners.

Commissioner Baker said he and other corrections workers have been calling local hospitals and acute care facilities to make sure any inmates who develop severe cases of COVID can be properly treated.

That is important, Commissioner Baker said, because 53 of the Vermonters are considered particularly vulnerable.

Their vulnerability is connected to their age, the commissioner said. Corrections Department policy says those with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and congestive heart failure will not be sent out of state.

Mr. Baker said the 53 are all over the age of 60. He noted that while there are many very healthy people over that age in the outside

world, prisoners are not usually in as good shape when they get older.

Dr. Levine noted the rate of positive results for COVID tests in Mississippi is around 22 percent. That means it was almost inevitable that a prison employee without symptoms was going to bring the disease into the prison.

Given that, Dr. Levine said, it will continue to be difficult to keep prisoners safe, and it may be hard for CoreCivic to keep the prison staffed if the illness continues to spread in the prison population.

Both Secretary Smith and Commissioner Baker said responsibility for the outbreak rests with them. They each acknowledged they ought to have kept a closer watch on how CoreCivic was dealing with the pandemic and made sure they were acting as Vermont authorities did following the serious outbreak at Northwestern Correctional Facility early in the pandemic.

One of the solutions Governor Scott proposed to deal with the problem of keeping prisoners safe out of state is to build a new state-of-the-art facility here.

He admitted the Legislature is largely opposed to new prison construction and agreed with questioners who pointed out the state's general desire to reduce its inmate population by reforming the criminal justice system.

Nevertheless, the Governor said, a new prison will be needed if only to deal with the deterioration of the state's existing facilities, even if the Correction's Department winds up housing a much smaller number of inmates.

According to Commissioner Mike Pieciak's report Friday, new COVID cases continue to show up at record levels across the nation. The

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Old Stone House Museum Day

This year's Old Stone House Day is going virtual, and it's no longer just a day; it's a weeklong celebration. Participants can join daily at 7 p.m. for enlivening talks, music, a local brewmaster, and a special Kids' Friday online extravaganza. At the end of the week, members of the Old Stone House Museum are invited to participate in the 2020 annual meeting. Please email Drew Bush at assistantdirector@oldstonehousemuseum.org with questions. Each day's virtual event is completely free on Zoom video conferencing.

For more information visit <https://oldstonehousemuseum.org/2020-programs/>.

The below is a schedule of events:

One Wednesday, August 5: Shanta Lee Gander — Bearing witness and the endurance of voice.

On Thursday, August 6: William Edelglass — A history of the concept of race.

On Friday, August 7: Kids' Friday extravaganza.

On Saturday, August 8: Understanding beer with a local brewmaster and live music.

On Sunday, August 9: Old Stone House Museum's annual meeting. All members are welcome. — from Old Stone House Museum.

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