

North Dakota governor changes tack and issues mask mandate

14 November 2020, by James MacPherson



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After months of resisting ordering the people of North Dakota to wear masks and limit the size of gatherings, the state's Republican governor relented in an effort to stem a coronavirus surge that is among the worst in the U.S. and that threatens to overwhelm the state's hospitals.

Gov. Doug Burgum's executive order Friday night came as a surprise. Throughout the pandemic, the former software executive had been leaving it to individuals to take [personal responsibility](#) for slowing the spread of the virus, beseeching the public during his weekly press briefings to wear masks but emphasizing a "light touch" by government.

But in a video message announcing his new restrictions, which took effect Saturday and will remain in effect until Dec. 13, a somber Burgum said, "Our situation has changed, and we must change with it."

In a news release, he said the state's doctors and nurses "need our help, and they need it now."

After a spring in which North Dakota had relatively few COVID-19 cases, the disease spread rapidly over the summer and has only picked up steam since. As of Saturday, there were only 18 free Intensive Care Unit beds and 178 non-ICU beds in hospitals throughout the state.

Health care professionals and some community leaders had been pleading for months with Burgum to impose such restrictions. On a tour of Bismarck last month, Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House [coronavirus](#) response coordinator, described the state's mask use and COVID-19 protocols as the worst she had seen anywhere in the country.

Under the order, people throughout the state must wear face coverings inside of businesses and indoor public settings, as well as in outdoor public settings where physical distancing isn't possible. It includes exceptions for children under age 5, individuals with a medical or mental health condition or disability that makes it unreasonable to wear a mask, and [religious services](#).

Failure to comply comes with a penalty of up to \$1,000, though it's unclear how the order will be enforced.

Grand Forks Police Sgt. Barb McLeod said the department was reviewing the order.

"We're going to focus on education and will try very hard not to file charges," she said.

Officers may respond to a call if from someone reports that another person isn't wearing a face covering, she said.

"We will try to educate them and explain the new rules that we all have to abide by," she said. "Hopefully, that takes care of it. That is our hope."

Burgum also directed all bars and restaurants to limit capacity to 50%, and he closed all in-person

service between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. Large-scale venues also are limited to 25% capacity.

Playoff championship contests and performance events sponsored by the North Dakota High School Activities Association during the month of November may continue under the order. But all high school winter sports and other extracurricular K-12 school activities are suspended until Dec. 14.

Burgum said the pause in activities will help keep schools open to in-person instruction.

The order came after the state reached a grim new milestone on Friday, as its COVID-19 death toll eclipsed the 700 mark, according to state health data. Nineteen more deaths were added Saturday, bringing the state's death toll to 726. More than half of the deaths have come in the past few weeks.

There were 2,373 new cases per 100,000 people in North Dakota over the past two weeks, which was the [highest rate](#) in the country, Johns Hopkins University researchers said.

Health officials on Saturday also recorded 2,278 new coronavirus infections, raising the statewide total since the pandemic started to nearly 63,000. The number of patients hospitalized with COVID-19 rose by 12 on Saturday, to 305.

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