

Statement on Identifying “Essential Elements” to Ease Social Distancing Protocols, Address White House Guidance to “Re-open” the U.S.

Approved by the Executive Committee of the Board of Regents on behalf of the full Board of Regents on April 17, 2020

The American College of Physicians (ACP) supports the goal of the Administration’s newly released “Guidelines for Opening Up America Again” to make decisions on easing some social distancing protocols in phases based on evidence of disease mitigation, but cautions against reducing social distancing prematurely, and calls for an evidence-based approach to ensure key essential elements are in place and scaled appropriately in communities before easing restrictions.

The American College of Physicians (ACP) agrees with the goals stated in the guidance of a phased approach that is “based on up-to-date data and readiness, mitigates the risk of resurgence, protects the most vulnerable, and is implementable on statewide or county-by-county basis” and that is predicated on downward trajectories in symptoms and cases, and hospitals having a robust testing program in place for at-risk healthcare workers, including emerging antibody testing.

However, ACP cautions that easing social distancing policies prematurely could have grave consequences for the health and well-being of millions of Americans. There is growing evidence that physical/social distancing, especially in states and localities with more robust restrictions and voluntary compliance by millions of Americans and employers, have been effective in reducing person-to-person contacts that can spread the virus. By slowing the virus’ spread and building up health system capacity, physical/social distancing is beginning to “flatten the curve.” Premature lifting of social distancing protocols can lead to a resurgence of the virus and potentially overwhelm health system capacity, and likely requiring that strict physical/social distancing be re-implemented.

Further, ACP asserts that several elements must be in place, and sufficiently scaled up, before it will be safe to ease social distancing restrictions. These include the availability of:

Population Level

1. Screening and Testing:

Widespread administration of a reliable method of testing for COVID-19 and accurate/reliable emerging antibody testing, on a scale to accurately determine that a sustained downward trajectory is being evidenced and sustained. Consent and sufficient privacy protections for patients being tested must be in place.

2. Prevention Measures:

An approach to scale up tracing of the contacts of those who test positive (contact tracing) that balances public health needs with confidentiality and privacy protections for patients. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield says contact tracing is “critical” to preventing “multiple community outbreaks that can spiral up into sustained community transmission.” [National Public Radio Interview, Morning Edition, April 10, 2020). We agree,

but this must be done with great care. Consent and sufficient privacy protections for patients must be in place.

3. Infrastructure

Sufficient workforce and supply capacity to do the testing, analysis, and follow up.

Health Care System Level

4. Resources

Fully protective Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for every frontline physician, nurse, or other professional health care worker.

5. Infrastructure

Sufficient hospital, physician, and health system capacity to treat patients with the virus.

Currently, the evidence suggests that the 5 necessary elements noted above are not in place in most communities.

While the White House guidance gives governor and local officials the authority and sole discretion to determine if the social distancing protocols can be eased based on the guidance, ACP believes that state and local authorities must make decisions based on the best available evidence, and the federal government must do more to ensure that the required tests, workforce capacity, supplies, and PPE are available and distributed based on need. Finally, until an effective vaccine and therapies are available, the United States and the world must be prepared for sustained social distancing protocols, even if eased to some degree in phases as supported by the evidence, as being part of the “new normal.”