

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issues statewide stay-at-home order

By Mary Ellen Klas and Steve Contorno

TALLAHASSEE — After weeks of resisting a statewide stay-home order, Gov. Ron DeSantis Wednesday signed an executive order limiting all activity in Florida to essential services over the next 30 days to try to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The order, which goes into effect Friday at 12:01 a.m., is intended to follow the direction of the White House, which revised its guidelines on Tuesday and extended its social distancing recommendations until the end of April.

Under this new order, all senior citizens and individuals with a “significant underlying medical condition” must remain at home, a severe crackdown on the state’s most vulnerable residents that goes beyond any previous measures to date.

All other Floridians can’t leave their home unless it’s to obtain or provide essential services, a phrase that has become increasingly familiar but has differed in meaning depending on where it’s used.

In the hours after DeSantis signed the order, local governments and businesses were cramming to understand how the state will define the term. The state will adhere to lengthy guidelines from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Miami-Dade County. Those lists include obvious services like hospitals, police and fire departments and grocery stores, but also hardware stores, pet supply stores, gun and ammo stores and laundromats.

It also includes people who work in vital infrastructure industries like energy, telecommunication, water, transportation and the defense. Private colleges are allowed to remain open to support online or “distance learning.”

The order comes one month after Florida had its first two cases of COVID-19 confirmed March 2: a 63-year-old Manatee County man who had not traveled recently and a 29-year-old Hillsborough County woman who had recently traveled to Italy.

“We’re going to be in this for another 30 days,” DeSantis said at a news conference crowded with reporters in his small Capitol office.

“That’s just the reality that we find ourselves in. And so so given those circumstances, given the the unique situation in Florida, I’m going to be doing an executive order today, directing all Floridians to limit movements and personal interactions outside the home to only those necessary to obtain or provide essential services or conduct essential activities.”

Florida now will become the 34th state to ask most residents to essentially stay home to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the deadly disease caused by the coronavirus.

The big unanswered question is whether it will make a difference — and was it too late. As of Wednesday, Florida was approaching 8,000 confirmed cases, an exponential rise from the reality on the ground a month ago. More than 100 have died. The worst outbreak is in South Florida, where most residents have been living under a shutdown for weeks, but there is now community spread in all corners of the state, including the Tampa Bay region.

Now is better than never, said Jennifer Tolbert, the director of state health reform at the Kaiser Family Foundation. She pointed to California and Washington — among the first to report COVID-19 cases and deaths — where new coronavirus cases are discovered at a much slower rate since they instituted statewide shutdowns.

“That is evidence that these social distancing measures do work,” Tolbert said. “The key is to sustain these efforts over time.”

Tampa Mayor Jane Castor, who learned of DeSantis’ order just before appearing on CNN, brushed off a question from host Anderson Cooper about whether it took the governor too long to act.

“He has acted now,” she said.

Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried, who has spent the last two weeks calling for a stay-home order and blasting the governor for being short-sighted, commended his decision.

“Thank you, governor, for making the right call,” said Fried, the lone Democrat holding a statewide elected office, in a statement. “Together, we will fight this virus and preserve the state we love.”

DeSantis’ executive order supersedes any local emergency actions, including those passed by Hillsborough and Pinellas counties. Those measures allowed non-essential businesses to remain open if they observed social distancing guidelines.

The order does not mandate any business shut down, however, it severely restricts the movement of employees and customers and many non-essential stores and offices will likely chose to temporarily close. Businesses are encouraged to telework and restaurants to provide food via drive-thru, take out or delivery.

Pinellas County Administrator Barry Burton said he was advised non-essential businesses would shutter, but was awaiting more definitive answers. Other local officials didn’t expect much change in day-to-day life in the Tampa Bay area under the new orders.

Said Clearwater City Manager Bill Horne: “I didn’t see anything in there that overrode what the county has established.”

Businesses, workers and residents in counties like Pasco and Hernando, which rejected local crackdowns, will likely experience far greater disruptions in every day life than those already living under safer-at-home restrictions.

The coronavirus outbreak has taken a sledgehammer to Florida businesses, crushing the state's tourism industry and nearly every other sector of the economy. Tampa Bay Chamber of Commerce president and chief Bob Rorhlack called the governor's orders "hard medicine, but it's something that's got to be done."

Hotels will be allowed to operate, though many have already closed because of low occupancy. Joe Collier, the president of hotel operator Mainsail Lodging and Development, said shutting down hotels would "require us to basically evict people and put them on the street."

There are also exemptions in the order for recreational activities like biking, running, fishing or hunting (if following social distancing guidelines), taking care of a pet or caring for a loved one or friend. Beaches, which have drawn national attention for teeming with spring breakers, remain open.

And DeSantis would allow people to attend religious services, a loophole that will be closely watched in Hillsborough County, where Tampa megachurch pastor Rodney Howard-Browne was arrested for holding two large Sunday services in defiance of a local emergency order. Sheriff Chad Chronister came under fire from the Hillsborough County GOP for making the arrest.

Tolbert said keeping churches and synagogues open "could lead to greater exposure" of the coronavirus.

Why now?

DeSantis did not arrive at this decision easily.

As recently as Tuesday, DeSantis told reporters that nobody from the White House had recommended that he make a statewide order.

He insisted then that a statewide stay-home order was unnecessary because the bulk of the cases, and the testing, has been in South Florida. Public health experts, however, have warned that the state's failure to implement stronger limitations on person-to-person contact increased the possibility that Florida would continue to see cases increase for months.

He dismissed the value of a statewide stay home order suggesting that on a trip to South Florida on Monday he had seen beaches that had been ordered closed with people gathering on them, anyway.

"It's really up to the locals to deal with them one way or the other," DeSantis said then.

Hours before DeSantis announced his decision Wednesday, U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams urged states that hadn't already gone ahead and issued a stay-at-home order to do so. Adams had spoken with DeSantis on Tuesday.

But DeSantis said Adams didn't influence his decision.

DeSantis did say he consulted with the White House and President Donald Trump

whom he said “agreed with with the approach of focusing on the hotspot.” That had been DeSantis’ preference as he faced pressure from the state’s leading businesses to allow non-essential businesses to operate to aid the economy.

But, the governor conceded, the president “understood that this is another 30-day situation and, and you got to just do what makes the most sense.”

Critics of his approach

For nearly two weeks, DeSantis endured blistering criticism from public health experts, state and local officials and political opponents as he insisted it was not good for Florida to get ahead of the guidelines as posted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

DeSantis followed a pattern of first allowing local mayors and city officials to make the tough calls about closing beaches, bars and businesses to contain the spread of the virus, before taking more dramatic action. In other states, governors were acting more aggressively, going beyond the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and issuing stay-home orders to curb the spread of the virus. Trump, who initially suggested the “prevention was worse than the disease,” seemed to agree.

But by Tuesday evening, President Trump’s top public health experts, Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx, predicted that if Americans continue to implement “full mitigation” measures for another 30 days it will reduce the projected number of U.S. deaths from COVID-19 to 100,000 to 240,000.

They also commended the states of California and Washington, where extreme social-distancing measures were put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 early.

So when Trump’s coronavirus task force ordered the nation to practice social distancing, work and school from home, avoid discretionary travel, stay away from nursing homes and limit social gatherings to 10 people for another 30 days, DeSantis had little choice but to follow.

The previous guidance from the White House regarding an easing back into normal life by Easter, April 12, “isn’t going to happen,” DeSantis said.

Democrats, who have called for a shutdown for weeks, responded with a resounding: it’s about time.

“I’d say better late than never, but being late may have catastrophic consequences for our residents and our health care system,” St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman said in a statement. “I am glad he heeded our call for statewide uniformity and urge all residents of our city and state to remain safer at home.”

U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston, said the delay in a statewide order had caused the virus to spread and more death.

“The governor’s order is welcome,” she said, “but it is overdue.”

Times staff writers Justine Griffin, Josh Solomon, Sara DiNatale, Richard

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