

A Plan for Pennsylvanians: Relief, Reopening, and Recovery

The Wolf Administration has taken broad and far-reaching actions to help meet the short and long-term needs of individual Pennsylvanians in the face of this unprecedented pandemic. Ensuring that Pennsylvanians from all walks of life have access to the resources they need has been and will continue to be a top priority of the Governor.

To provide **relief** to individuals experiencing food insecurity, the Administration has:

- Worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure that individuals seeking assistance from food banks and those critically in need of food no longer need to complete cumbersome paperwork and income verification to prove they are eligible for or in need of food.
- Extended Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) certification periods for households that were scheduled to expire between March and May 2020 for six months to prevent SNAP case closures.
- Begun to issue emergency allotments to all SNAP households for March and April 2020, increasing the current monthly allotment for households across the board.
- Lifted burdensome requirements for the State Food Purchase Program to allow county governments, regional food banks, and emergency food providers flexibility in determining eligibility.
- Partnered with United Way PA 211 to make available a comprehensive list of COVID-19 specific food resources.
- Launched a partnership with Operation BBQ Relief and the Salvation Army to deliver more than 700,000 meals to all corners of the commonwealth.
- Boosted food bank supplies by directing \$2.6 million to charitable food programs through the Neighborhood Assistance Program.
- Procured 750,000 shelf stable meals through the Defense Logistics Agency, which are being made available to food banks and senior home delivered meal programs.
- Worked to ensure that free school meal programs are transitioned into take-home or community distribution programs so the food and nutrition needs of students across the state continue to be met.
- The PA Department of Transportation (PennDOT) has repurposed staff to provide additional workforce capacity for food banks across the state that are struggling to attract volunteers.

To provide **relief** to individuals struggling with student loan debt:

- Federal student loan borrowers are automatically being placed in an administrative forbearance which temporarily stops monthly payments from March 13, 2020 through September 30, 2020. Payments can still be made if borrowers choose.
- This is in addition to action the federal government took to temporarily set the interest rate to 0% on defaulted and non-defaulted Direct Loans, defaulted and non-defaulted FFEL Program loans, and Federal Perkins Loans.
- In addition, for the American Education Services (AES) and commercial loan portfolio operated by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA), PHEAA is notifying borrowers that forbearance through September 30, 2020 is offered upon borrower request.

To provide **relief** to individuals who have been furloughed or laid off, or whose hours have been reduced:

- In addition to state Unemployment Compensation (UC) benefits, which provide roughly half of an individual's full-time weekly income up to \$572 per week, the federal CARES Act expanded UC benefits through several new programs:
 - **Pandemic Unemployment Assistance** (PUA) expands benefits to gig-economy workers, independent contractors, and self-employed individuals who are otherwise ineligible for UC.
 - **Pandemic Unemployment Assistance** (FPUC) provides an additional \$600 per week, on top of regular UC benefits, to all UC recipients.
 - **Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation** (PEUC) provides an additional 13 weeks of UC benefits to individuals that exhaust their regular 26 weeks of benefits, for a total of 39 weeks of coverage.
- The UC program has also sent information to UC claimants on other financial resources and assistance they may benefit from, including paid leave provided by the Federal Families First Act, and assistance related to managing a debt, rent and mortgage, utilities and other household costs, food, child care, mental health and substance abuse, and accessing health insurance. The information also includes connections to organizations that can provide wraparound services, including County Assistance Offices, United Way PA 211, and PA CareerLink®. This information is also available on the UC website, in addition to emails sent directly to UC claimants or mailed brochures for those without emails.

To provide **relief** to individuals who are uninsured or underinsured:

- Announced all major health insurers providing comprehensive medical coverage in the commonwealth will cover medically appropriate COVID-19 diagnostic testing and associated treatment for consumers and have committed to waive any cost-sharing for the testing.
- In addition, many auto and homeowners insurers are giving money back to drivers who are spending less time on the road and placing moratoriums on canceling policies, knowing some members are challenged to pay premiums in this difficult time.
- Made telehealth the preferred delivery method for medically necessary health care services for physical health, behavioral health, and substance use disorder services and explained that telephone only services may be used where video technology is not available. Additionally, all services delivered via telehealth in the Medical Assistance program are being reimbursed at the same level as in-person services.
- Established a 24/7 mental health crisis line that received more than 1,300 calls in the first 10 days.

To provide **relief** to students and families across our early childhood and K-12 education systems:

- In this time of unprecedented school closures, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has worked with Intermediate Units (IUs) throughout the commonwealth to develop and implement continuity of education plans to ensure seniors graduate, students can be promoted to the next grade, and all students continue to have access to remote learning through the remainder of the academic year.

- The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has coordinated with rural communities across Pennsylvania to provide access to roving wifi buses to meet the internet and remote learning needs of students who lack access to the internet.
- PDE has also partnered with the statewide leads for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) to offer communities with limited internet access use of free instructional programming that is being broadcast by all of Pennsylvania's PBS affiliates.
- The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) has worked with local communities to identify and stand up child care facilities for children of health care workers and first responders to ensure they can continue to respond to the COVID-19 disaster while knowing their children are being cared for.

With new case counts showing that these aggressive efforts have flattened the curve, the Governor and his administration will begin to plan for a **reopening** process that protects Pennsylvanians and helps to stabilize the economy.

To that end, the Administration will work with economic and public health experts to determine the metrics used for safe reopening by taking a regional, sector-based approach. In consultation with Team PA, the Department of Health, the Department of Community and Economic Development, the Department of Labor and Industry, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, and others, the Administration will develop guidance for businesses, local governments, workers, customers, and others and guide a safe reopening process.

Reopening Principles

1. Our approach will be data driven and reliant upon quantifiable criteria to drive a targeted, evidence-based, regional approach to reopenings in Pennsylvania.
2. We will put forth guidance and recommendations for employers, individuals, and health care facilities and providers for assured accountability as we reopen.
3. Reopening necessitates that adequate personal protective equipment and diagnostic testing are available.
4. Reopening requires a monitoring and surveillance program that allows the commonwealth to deploy swift actions for containment or mitigation.
5. Protections for vulnerable populations must remain steadfast throughout the reopening process, such as limitations on visitors to congregate care facilities and prisons.
6. Limitations on large gatherings unrelated to occupations should remain in place for the duration of the reopening process.

Developing a **recovery** framework and programs that make a difference for the people of Pennsylvania is paramount. That framework must include, at a minimum:

- Fair, family-sustaining wages for all Pennsylvanians.
 - Increase the minimum wage to \$12 with a path to \$15.
 - Provide additional hazard pay for essential, front-line workers during a public health emergency.
- Enactment of better worker protection standards.

- Employees should not be discharged, penalized, or discriminated against if they isolate or quarantine related to COVID-19.
 - Employers must maintain safe and healthy environments.
 - Protections should also exist for employees who report workplace violations.
- Expansion of paid sick and family leave policies.
 - Expand paid sick and family and medical leave policies to ensure that workers can take care of their health and that of their family when needed.
- Expansion of safe, affordable, and high-quality child care.
- Strengthening of the Unemployment and Workers Compensation Insurance systems.
 - Expand Unemployment Compensation (UC) benefits for self-employed, gig economy workers, and independent contractors similar to the federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program.
 - Expand Workers' Compensation (WC) for health care workers, emergency responders, grocery store and food supply workers, and other essential workers at life-sustaining businesses that are at higher risk for contracting COVID-19 at work.
- Broad funding flexibilities to support continuity of education and continued active distance learning (including planned instruction and enrichment) for all students. This should include a specific focus on increased flexibilities for students with disabilities who may have challenges learning remotely.
- Expand the authority of the secretary of education to mandate continuity of education and continued active distance learning (including planned instruction and enrichment) for all students during a public health emergency established by a gubernatorial disaster declaration.
- Require all educators to receive professional development on virtual teaching and online learning techniques; require all student teachers to be trained to develop and deliver online courses; allow student teachers to use online teaching to count toward some of their student teaching requirements.
- Accountability and transparency for spending and dispensation of federal, state, and local resources to address the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Expansion of student loan forgiveness and repayment programs, particularly focusing on debt relief for individuals who are the front lines of responding the COVID-19 disaster.
- Expansion of rapid re-employment programs to support businesses and workers, with an emphasis on businesses and individuals impacted by the business closure order and COVID-19-related layoffs based on Labor Market Information and UC data.