

Governor's Transcript:

I know this is an incredibly difficult time with disruption most of us have never experienced, and there's a lot of uncertainty, fear and anxiety across the nation. I understand how tough things are right now and will continue to be. But what's really important is to focus on and complete our first mission: to work together as one community to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Yesterday, when we announced the death of two elderly Vermonters with COVID-19, we had a stark reminder of why the mitigation actions we're taking are necessary. We have to recognize that many of us will get this virus and while many will have moderate symptoms, we must do all we can to protect our older Vermonters and those with underlying conditions who are at greater risk for severe outcomes like what we announced last night. The consequences are serious, but the response is literally in our hands.

So, I want to thank Vermonters for their flexibility and help in responding to this pandemic.

From folks picking up supplies for elderly neighbors; to the grocery store crews restocking shelves.

From our restaurant owners, workers, educators and school administrators who've met recent adversity with understanding and a sense of service; to our healthcare workers, nurses and doctors on the front line doing all they can to fight this virus and keep us healthy.

From our Department of Health workers and those from other agencies—many of whom I visited last night at the call center—working second and third shifts to answer questions and track response needs; to state employees—even former employees—stepping up outside their daily jobs to help and do whatever they can.

I want every Vermonter to know I fully understand the incredible economic and emotional toll coronavirus is having and will continue to have on each and every one of us. The measures we're implementing, while disruptive, are based on the best science we have from experts and we're committed to doing all we can to help people weather this storm.

As we continue to work on our first mission to protect the health of Vermonters, we also know financial security is critical for us to recover from this pandemic as well. So, we're here today to announce steps we've taken to support working Vermonters affected by COVID-19 and additional actions we're going to put into place.

Let me be clear: my team and I are fully aware these initiatives are not enough. People are hurting and businesses are at risk. Let me assure you we will pull every lever and turn every dial we can to support folks through this time and look towards economic recovery even while we're closing in on the eye of the storm. The initiatives we're outlining today are small steps but they're just the beginning and we need people to know what resources are available to them right now.

We've already taken several actions to provide some economic relief for Vermonters.

To start, we made [unemployment available to all Vermonters who can't work because of coronavirus](#). We also [waived the work search requirement](#) for those who are laid off or had their hours reduced during this emergency. This of course means many more Vermonters calling the Department of Labor for help and we continue to expand capacity and have simplified the process for Vermonters. This includes an

[online form for initial claims and tripling the number of staff in our claims center](#), borrowing people from other agencies and departments to help out, including a generous offer of staff support from the Auditor's office.

With [schools](#) and [daycares](#) now closed, it's my hope we can extend these benefits to those who need to stay home to care for their kids and we'll work with the legislature to do so. To further protect workers, I'll also ask the legislature to extend job protections for those employees of small businesses who cannot work due to family and medical reasons.

Knowing the burden of healthcare and how utility costs weigh heavily on families, I've directed the Department of Financial Regulation and DVHA to take several actions to help reduce financial pressure where we can and make sure Vermonters continue to have access to care and prescriptions. DFR acted quickly to ensure [Vermonters didn't have to pay out of pocket for COVID-19 testing](#) and directed insurers to [allow for a 30-day supply of prescription medication](#) for patients. Commissioner Pieciak is now working with MVP and Blue Cross Blue Shield to try to make sure no one loses their healthcare coverage during this time. And I've directed DVHA to waive premiums for the Dr. Dynasaur program.

DFR is also working with financial institutions to encourage flexibility for customers, things like [waiving fees and delaying loan repayments](#), which is just the start to providing relief.

On the utility front, my team at the Public Service Department has been working with our utilities to ensure that folks are not disconnected during this emergency due to inability to pay. I'm happy to report that our utilities overwhelmingly stepped up to do the right thing and their good conduct and cooperation was acknowledged in the [PUC's recent order to formalize this protection](#).

I know the steps we've had to take to slow this virus down are already taking an incredible toll on businesses and their employees, especially our bars and restaurants which are so vital to our economy and our culture. Again, we will do everything we can to help these businesses and their employees, but my heart goes out to each and every one of them as they face the brunt of this right now.

We've acted on some other opportunities to provide relief and we will do more.

For instance, yesterday I eased liquor laws to allow restaurants—which can [only offer takeout and delivery](#) to help mitigate the spread of the virus—to [sell alcoholic beverages as part of takeout service](#). While this may seem trivial, I wanted to allow as much flexibility as possible while their dine-in service is closed.

We've also requested** a disaster declaration from the Small Business Administration which would make emergency loans available to Vermont small businesses. To supplement this, we'll be working with the legislature to create a business loan program through VEDA, as we did in the immediate response to Tropical Storm Irene.

As we work to expand UI benefits, we're also working with the legislature to make sure UI experience ratings are not negatively affected.

ACCD is also providing resources to support businesses with technical assistance, regular guidance and more at accd.vermont.gov.

Again, we know this is not nearly enough and there will be much more coming in the future to help our small businesses—the backbone of our economy.

While working to provide some economic relief, we're also working to ease the regulatory burden and simplify government services in ways that will help us better respond to this crisis.

For example, the Department of Motor Vehicles shifted to [online, phone and mail services](#), and to help take some of the stress off, I directed them to grant a [90-day extension for all license and registration renewals](#).

We know two areas of tremendous need right now are in our health and communications systems. We've already [expanded telehealth services](#)—including for mental health needs—and we'll also work to give our healthcare providers more flexibility on licensing, staffing and referrals and ease ANR's procedural requirements to accommodate surge capacity needs at healthcare facilities.

And we're looking to ease up on barriers to communications infrastructure to make sure those systems aren't interrupted.

Additionally, the Public Service Department is developing an interactive map of free Wi-Fi hotspots to support our students and workers now learning and working remotely.

On the federal level, we continue to assess what's being passed and being considered in Washington, which will provide more relief for workers and businesses. I want to thank our congressional delegation—Senators Leahy and Sanders and Congressman Welch—who have been so supportive and taking my numerous calls each and every time I make them.

I also want to thank the legislature—particularly leadership—who have been standing ready to act on our needs in this crisis and who we will continue to work closely with on several of the proposals outlined.

As I've already made clear, these are just the first steps of many to come that we think can make a difference for Vermont, but we know—I know—that many more will be needed and we'll take those steps together. We'll take each challenge as it comes, calmly and with the best interest of all Vermonters in mind. Each and every decision we make will be informed by the best science and with information from subject matter experts to protect Vermonters.

I want to close by again commenting on how proud I am of the people of our state and how encouraged I am with what I've seen as we pull together. Little things like neighbors encouraging others to get takeout from our restaurants, businesses donating masks and personal protective gear to hospitals, bus drivers delivering meals and learning materials on the routes they used to pick up students on and folks taking a moment to thank the custodians for working overtime to keep our spaces clean and safe.

Just like Irene or the Great Depression of the 30s or the flood of 1927, we will get through this and we'll get through it together.

- End Transcript -