

Gov. Brian P. Kemp gave the following remarks during an update on Georgia's COVID-19 situation Wednesday:

"I'm joined today by Department of Public Health Commissioner Dr. Kathleen Toomey, Adjutant General Tom Carden, and Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Director Homer Bryson. All of the people operating under the direction of the leaders standing with me are remarkable, working long hours on little sleep. I want to thank these Georgians for their hard work and commitment to health and well-being of our citizens. We are blessed to have the best and brightest on the front lines of this fight.

"As of noon today, we now have 4,638 cases in Georgia spanning 139 counties with 139 deaths due to COVID-19. So far, the state lab has processed 2,100 tests, and commercial vendors have processed 18,226 tests. As many of you know, testing in Georgia has increased rapidly over the last couple of weeks, but our capacity was limited due by the number of reliable and available tests. And as many of you here have reported, competition among states for access to commercial labs is obviously at an all-time high. Testing is an important tool for identifying cases earlier, targeting hot-spots in our state with more resources, developing models, and providing timely information to the public.

"These tests are vital for our frontline workers, Georgia's doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, first responders and law enforcement, as well as medically fragile populations, including those living in long-term care facilities and the elderly. In short, tests define the battlefield and help us develop a strategy to win the war.

"Yesterday, we were proud to announce plans to quickly – and dramatically – increase the availability of testing for COVID-19 in Georgia. This proactive and timely initiative is leveraging laboratory resources under the University System of Georgia, Georgia Public Health Laboratory, and Emory University to rapidly enhance surge capacity. This is a unique public-private partnership - which was announced and set into motion yesterday - for us to start processing over 3,000 samples a day.

"From the beginning, we have used data, science, and the advice of healthcare professionals to determine our preparedness and relief efforts. These new testing numbers will provide a better picture of COVID-19's impact on our state and inform our decisions going forward. I do want to pause and thank University System of Georgia Chancellor Steve Wrigley, Dr. Kathleen Toomey, and their respective staff for their hard work on this important partnership. We want to assure Georgians in every part of our state that expanding testing remains a top priority for me and those who are with me today. The status quo is not acceptable. We will continue to innovate and push so all Georgians who need to be tested for COVID-19 can do so in a safe, convenient way.

"Since forming the Coronavirus Task Force in February, we have announced several orders to keep our families and communities safe. We are in this fight together, and I want to share – once again – how we can flatten the infection curve in Georgia. To stop the spread, we must practice social distancing. To mitigate the risk, it's best to stay at home. For the most part, Georgians are heeding this advice, and we are grateful for that. Traffic – especially in the metro area – has lessened dramatically. We have folks teleworking, attending church online, getting take-out or delivery for meals, and postponing social events for the greater good. These are personal choices, and they are not easy ones to make. But when Georgians listen to the guidance provided and follow the orders issued, they are actively joining the fight against COVID-19. When hardworking Georgians limit their travel, limit their interaction with others, and limit their activities, they are buying us more time to get additional hospital beds ready, order supplies, and prepare for more positive cases.

"All of us standing here know that this fight is won at the community level, not at the State Capitol. We win this war by hunkering down and choppin' a lot of wood. At the President's coronavirus press briefings, Dr. Birx has echoed these truths. It'll be the hard work of people in cities, towns, and communities across our nation, following the advice of healthcare experts and making changes to their daily lives to fulfill a higher calling, and that's what we are seeing in Georgia. Our people are determined. We're resilient. We will accept nothing short of victory over this virus.

"Look, we have challenges and plenty of opportunities ahead. I encourage my fellow Georgians to hang in there. I know you are tired. I know you want to return to business as usual, but we must first overcome the obstacles in our path. By doing that, we will get through this together. These are unprecedented times, and state officials are taking historic measures to meet the needs of healthcare providers, hospitals, patients, and communities throughout Georgia. Teams at the State Operations Center and National Stockpile Warehouse are working around the clock, identifying needs, strengthening the supply chain, and ensuring that we have a plan for any scenario.

"As of this morning, we have 3,520 medical-surgical beds, 450 critical beds, and 1,006 ventilators available in our hospitals across the state. According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, Georgia will reach peak hospital capacity on April 23 – nearly three weeks from today. This model assumes that Georgians continue to abide by the state's orders and use social distancing methods through the end of May. These numbers update on a daily basis, and we are continuing to monitor capacity.

"State officials are closely working with the Georgia Hospital Association and ambulatory surgical centers to take a full inventory of beds and ventilators. We are spotting trends to prepare for the days and weeks

ahead. So far, we have purchased four medical pods, which are basically steel shipping containers that have been converted to mobile units with beds and equipment. Each unit offers twenty to twenty-four beds with a nursing station to treat patients as they arrive. These will be state-owned assets that we can quickly deploy to hard-hit areas. We have submitted a request to FEMA to staff these pods using military medical providers.

"To expand current bed capacity, I temporarily suspended certificate of need laws. Now, healthcare administrators are re-configuring existing hospital wings or embarking on new construction to address the looming concern. Commissioner Frank Berry with the Department of Community Health is working with multiple hospital systems to re-open closed facilities for use. I want to take this time to give a big shout-out to Phoebe Putney, HCA Healthcare, and Piedmont for going above and beyond. These systems have engaged with the state to reopen several facilities and bring hospital beds online as we prepare for potential patient surge.

"As many of you know, Dougherty County is one of the hardest hit areas in our state. To date, we have shipped necessary supplies and plan more shipments based on the needs of the Phoebe Putney system. The Department of Public Health has deployed an epidemiology team in coordination with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We have also deployed two Georgia National Guard medic teams to the county. These two Guard units are assisting existing staff at Phoebe and a nearby nursing home facility on everything from administrative needs to medical treatment. As General Carden will explain, these units are new, created specifically for this purpose. That's an incredible testament to General Carden and his team that they were able to identify, mobilize, and successfully deploy these soldiers in such a short time period.

"As reported, the state has worked closely with local health officials to establish more bed capacity at Phoebe North and provide the staffing and equipment necessary to relieve Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital. We expect Phoebe North to be completed and ready to treat patients by early next week. I've talked to Scott Steiner, the CEO of Phoebe Putney, multiple times over the last week, as well as Dougherty County Commission Chairman Chris Cohilas, Lee County Commission Chairman Billy Mathis, and other local leaders. We are doing everything in our power to ensure Dougherty County and surrounding communities have the resources and support that they desperately need in this crisis.

"As I mentioned a moment ago, the Georgia National Guard has identified new teams to replicate the units sent to Albany and Dougherty County at similar hot-spots across the state. And just yesterday, the Georgia Guard announced another innovative way to stop the spread of coronavirus across our state. This virus is deadly, but it is even more dangerous if left unchecked in a long-term care facility. To assist the operators and managers of these facilities in keeping their patients and residents safe, we will activate over 100

Guardsmen to deploy to any long-term care facility, assisted living facility, or nursing home, with COVID-19 cases. These troops will implement infection control protocols and enhanced sanitation methods to dramatically reduce COVID-19 exposure among vulnerable residents.

"Going forward, I cannot overstate the importance of nursing home facilities and long-term care homes following public health guidelines. Our Task Force is in regular communication with the Georgia Health Care Association to make sure these facilities are receiving accurate, up-to-date information from the Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In the weeks to come, Georgia National Guard units will have boots on the ground to assist those operations and ensure that we're protecting our most vulnerable citizens.

"As I mentioned previously, on March 23, I issued an executive order banning gatherings of more than ten people unless there is at least six feet between each person at all times and requiring medically fragile Georgians to shelter in place through April 6, 2020. I've signed several executive orders lifting restrictions on getting more doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and pharmacy technicians to work; closing K-12 schools through April 24, 2020; and raising the amount of unemployment benefits available to Georgians facing financial hardship.

"I've also authorized the State Board of Education to waive certain state rules, regulations, policies, procedures, and provisions to assist in the State's response to COVID-19; allowed the use of real-time audio-visual technology to assist in notarizing real estate documents; and, among other actions related to future revenue, directed the Commissioner of Revenue to implement waivers for Conservation Use Value Assessment and Forest Land Use Protection Act applications. I've transferred additional emergency funds to pay for more supplies and equipment. All of these measures help us prepare for the weeks ahead as we fight this pandemic facing our country. We are constantly reviewing the data, modeling, and science.

"I'd like to thank GEMA Director Bryson for completing the isolation site at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center in a very short period of time. We currently have five patients at the facility, which has a max capacity of forty individuals. Like the site at Hard Labor Creek State Park, this facility is for patients that are not able to isolate themselves otherwise, and we'll continue to have this resource available for those individuals.

"As we continue to fight this virus, our office is receiving reports that are concerning and deserve the public's immediate attention. We have been told by one Atlanta-area hospital that they are seeing a 15 percent increase in domestic violence cases in their facility. This is disturbing and cannot be tolerated. If you – or

someone you know - needs help, please call Georgia's domestic violence hotline at 1-800-334-2836. That's 1-800-334-2836.

"We are also seeing a reduction in the reports of child abuse, likely as a consequence of our educators not having as much face time with Georgia students. Teachers and administrators are often the first ones to see the signs of abuse, and with schools closed, we must remain vigilant about this problem and work to remedy it. If you are a child in crisis or know of someone who needs help, please reach out to the Georgia Department of Family and Children Services at 1-855-GACHILD. That's 1-855-422-4453.

"And finally, my office has received dozens of calls and emails from many Georgians out of work, many who have had their hours cut back, or business owners which have had to close down. As someone who spent my entire career in the private sector, I know the economic impact of this global pandemic. Georgians have to feed and clothe their families. They have to pay rent, utilities, and gas. The reality is that government checks only pay for so much and go so far. Hundreds of thousands of Georgians are facing financial ruin because of this virus.

"I was a builder and developer during the Great Recession. We were living hour to hour, day to day. I've been there, trying to support my family. It's absolutely frightening. So for the waitress who has lost her job, or the small business owner who doesn't know how they'll make payroll this week, or the hourly worker who barely made rent today, I hear you. I'm praying for you, and I'm working every day for you.

"Commissioner Mark Butler has done a great job streamlining the unemployment benefit process, and we were among the first states in the Southeast to be approved for expanded Small Business Administration loans. We've also extended the state tax filing deadline to match the federal deadline and issued guidance to workers looking for hourly jobs to get through the next few weeks. We will continue doing whatever it takes to keep you safe and ensure a strong, prosperous future.

"These are difficult moments as a nation and as a state, but these times also bring out the best in us. They remind us of the good that still exists. I want to take a moment to offer my thanks to many in our business community who have stepped up and done their part to help fight COVID-19.

"Georgia's own Home Depot is donating millions of dollars in PPE and other products, prioritizing fulfillment of orders to hospitals, healthcare providers, and our first responders.

"Honeywell, an industrial technology manufacturer with a hub here in Atlanta, is ramping up production of N95 masks from a new facility in Rhode Island and another facility in Arizona that will come online in

May. They've already doubled their production of N95 masks, and within the next ninety days, they will have five times the capacity to produce these critical healthcare supplies.

"In local communities across the Peach State, we've seen small businesses completely re-purpose their staff and production lines to make other materials that are in short supply. Not far from here, Old Fourth Ward Distillery has begun producing hand sanitizer. From TSG Resolute in Americus to a partnership between Coca-Cola and Georgia Tech here in Atlanta, businesses are finding innovative new ways to manufacture protective surgical shield masks for healthcare workers on the front lines of this fight.

"Over the past few days, the White House has issued a new federal timeline for mitigating the spread of coronavirus. Public health officials are discouraging large group gatherings, advising the elderly and anyone with underlying health problems to stay home, encouraging people to telework, and keeping kids home from school until April 30.

"Georgia's orders reflect the guidance and direction from President Trump and his Coronavirus Task Force. I have empowered numerous agencies and officials to enforce them. The Department of Natural Resources will limit large gatherings with officials patrolling bodies of water and campgrounds. They are monitoring coves where people tend to congregate and, if necessary, using bullhorns to tell people to disband. Officials will approach people and demand compliance with our orders for the well-being of our citizens and state.

"Local officials are also working hard to ensure compliance with local directives, which vary by city and county across our state. Georgia State Patrol is prepared to take appropriate action to ensure full compliance – no exceptions. The reality is that if you do not comply, you are violating the law, and you can face stiff penalties. Even worse, you are endangering the lives of those around you, your loved ones, and your fellow Georgians.

"In Georgia, the safety and well-being of each citizen comes first. We will do what is necessary if people fail to comply.

"Thousands of Georgians have used the power of social media to tell people about these orders and hold people accountable. Keep doing it, folks. It's a huge help. To all of the people who have reported non-compliant businesses and organizations to our COVID-19 hotline, thank you. We are following up on those complaints and getting companies to do what's right for their employees and the people they serve. Many of our state's most loved brands are out there setting an example for others, like Home Depot and Chick-fil-A, and we appreciate their leadership during these difficult moments.

"Please stay safe, enjoy your time with your family, and follow our directives to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Do your part to urge your friends, neighbors, and co-workers to do the same.

"In keeping with our promise to let the data and experts guide our decision-making, I am announcing another measured, strategic step forward. Over the past forty-eight hours, the modeling and data have dramatically changed for Georgia. The CDC has announced that individuals can be infected and begin to spread coronavirus earlier than previously thought – even if they have no symptoms. From a public health standpoint, this revelation is a game-changer. In addition, new models show that Georgia will need more time to prepare for hospital surge capacity, and while we are making excellent progress, we have to be more aggressive.

"For these reasons, and in accordance with Dr. Toomey's recommendation, I will sign an executive order today closing K-12 public schools through the rest of this school year. Online learning will continue.

"Tomorrow, I will sign a statewide shelter in place order, which will go into effect on Friday and run through April 13, 2020, in line with our public health emergency order. Dr. Toomey and I are finalizing the order to make sure it keeps our citizens – in every zip code – safe and healthy. We are taking action to protect our hospitals, help our medical providers, and prepare for patient surge. This action will ensure uniformity among jurisdictions for Georgians sheltering in place and help families and businesses comply with its provisions. We will publish the order tomorrow and issue detailed guidance so Georgians can get prepared. We will continue to monitor the data and make adjustments as needed, keeping members of the public informed every step of the way.

"When I announced my campaign for Governor three years ago today, I told a crowded room of supporters in Cobb County that there would be difficult days ahead but to remember the words of Joshua 1:9: 'Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged. The Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

"Years later, I still believe that with my entire heart. To our doctors, nurses, medical staff: be strong and courageous. To our first responders, truck drivers, grocery store workers, and food delivery workers: be strong and courageous. To mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers: be strong and courageous. To the hardworking Georgians from every corner of our great state: be strong and courageous.

"We are in this together. You are not alone. Thank you, and God Bless."