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April 19, 2020

Governor Bill Lee
1st Floor, State Capitol
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Governor Lee:

I am writing to share feedback with you on a poll I conducted of my constituents and to plead with you to lift restrictions now and reopen Tennessee back for business instead of waiting until May. Every day that goes by with government imposed restrictions we are losing millions in economic output, small businesses are facing greater certainty of permanently closing due to crippling economic hardship and workers' fears are growing as to how they are going to bring in money to support their families and cover their bills. Among nearly 9,000 people I polled, 55% were in favor of lifting the restrictions imposed by Executive Order No. 27. This number is growing with the Paycheck Protection Program running out of money with many businesses being left out and people being unable to access the TN Dept. of Labor and Workforce Development's website to file unemployment claims because it lacks the capacity to handle the increasing number of claims being submitted.

Not only am I pleading with you to lift restrictions now due to the destruction they are having on our economy and businesses and individuals left unemployed not to mention the negative impact it is having on the mental health of our citizens with an increased rate of suicide (one week resulting in more deaths to suicide in TN than to COVID-19), but also inasmuch as the statistics and medical research don't support a continued shut-down of businesses and a stay-at-home order. For example, the U.S. has a far lower COVID-19 death rate per million by population than nearly all the other major industrial nations. Moreover, the number of actual deaths in the U.S. resulting from COVID-19 is believed to be inflated inasmuch as Dr. Deborah Birx of the White House Coronavirus Task Force confirmed that in the U.S., with a positive test, deaths by any cause occurring during the pandemic are reported as a Coronavirus fatality. There is an important distinction between dying "with" COVID-19 and dying "from" COVID-19 for which there is no accounting in the reported numbers.

Alleged “expert” epidemiologists have engaged in speculative forecasting that has been all over the place, varying from predictions of as many as 2.5 million anticipated deaths to predictions as low as tens of thousands nationally. No model has appeared to be accurate. Our own federal government has significantly lowered its estimate and is now estimating that COVID-19 will result in approximately 60,000 deaths nationally; however, this number needs to be put into perspective. The 2018-2019 flu season resulted in 55,672 deaths from flu and pneumonia, but the government did not shut down our economy over the flu.

Looking at the hospitalization rate of the at-risk population (those over 65 years of age and/or with a weakened immune system), the rate is 16.8 per 100,000 for COVID-19 whereas it is 195.4 per 100,000 for the flu. The data shows that for the majority of the population, COVID-19 is a mild illness with minor, if any, symptoms. This is underscored by a study released Friday by Stanford University reflecting that the infection rate is 50-85 times higher than what was previously thought, but that the fatality rate is 50-85 times lower than what modeling has predicted and what data is reflecting.

Moreover, it is imperative to take into consideration population density. The majority of deaths resulting from COVID-19 are occurring in densely populated cities. For example, the last numbers I saw reflected that 30% of all deaths have occurred in New York City, which is leading the country. New York City has over 56,000 inhabitants per square kilometer whereas Nashville and Memphis, which lead the number of Coronavirus deaths in Tennessee, have 4,000 inhabitants per square kilometer at peak. The rest of Tennessee has population densities averaging less than 100 inhabitants per square kilometer.

It’s worth noting that Professor Yitzhak Ben Israel of Tel Aviv University, who also serves on the research and development advisory board for Teva Pharmaceuticals, plotted the rates of new Coronavirus infections of the U.S., U.K., Sweden, Italy, Israel, Switzerland, France, Germany and Spain, and found that the Coronavirus follows a fixed pattern. According to him, “irrespective of whether the country quarantined like Israel, or went about business as usual like Sweden, coronavirus peaked and subsided in the exact same way.” His graphs illustrate that all countries experienced seemingly identical Coronavirus infection patterns irrespective of their approach. Additionally, Dr. Brandon P. Reines, an adjunct professor of Bioinformatics at the University of Pittsburgh Medical School who completed a postdoctoral fellowship in Immunology at the U.S. National Institutes of Health, has posited that overprotecting people from COVID-19 could make it more lethal.

Closure of our state’s economy has been costly and the enormity of the damage grows exponentially by the day to the extent the economy remains shut down. Small businesses are desperate to reopen. A study of 5,800 small businesses by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed that 43% of small businesses are closed, and have laid off 40% of their workers. Moreover, the median (small) business has more than \$10,000 in monthly expenses and less than one month of cash on hand. The Mercatus Center at George Mason University estimates “that the real GDP growth rate will decline 5%” for each month of partial economic shutdown. Every continued day of a shutdown is a day too long, damaging the economy, creating poverty, increasing deaths from suicide, drug use, malnutrition and other diseases of poverty and despair and resulting in massive losses of tax revenue and thereby jeopardizing the government’s ability to honor promises to its citizens.

I believe the time to reopen our state is now, not a week from now or next month, especially for rural counties with a very limited number of Covid-19 cases. For example, Henry County has two Covid-19 patients in the hospital with only one of those on a ventilator. Notably, the vast majority of small businesses are closed in my district (Benton, Henry and Stewart Counties) as a result of your Executive Orders but the “big-box” stores such as Walmart, Lowes, and the like, remain open with most of the county population visiting these stores. It is sad to see these corporate giants raking in money while small business is being destroyed under crippling restrictions.

As a constitutional, conservative Republican, I believe in and ran on a platform of advocating for reduced regulations and small, limited government that works for, serves and answers to its citizens, not restricts or infringes upon their rights or overrides their opinion. It is for this reason and all of the above-cited reasons that I urge you, on behalf of the majority of my constituents, to end now the restrictions imposed by Executive Order No. 27. I also join with Knoxville-based physician and surgeon Dr. Brian Hall in asking that you also repeal Executive Orders 18 and 25, allowing the resumption of all surgical and dental procedures both elective as well as emergent. I agree with Dr. Hall’s statement that “Physicians and surgeons are infinitely more capable of making risk/benefit decisions for their patients and their community than any politician.” I also join Dr. Hall in petitioning you to focus on protecting the “at risk population” – those over 65 and/or with fragile/suppressed immune systems – who should be encouraged to stay at home and visitation to remain limited to nursing homes and hospital wards.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this letter.

Sincerely,



Bruce I. Griffey
State Representative District 75

cc: Mark Ezell, Commissioner of TN Dept. of Tourism Development
Stuart McWhorter, Head of TN COVID-19 Unified Command
Cameron Sexton, TN Speaker of the House