

HEALTH

Indiana to move to Stage 5 of coronavirus reopening Saturday while staying masked

Shari Rudavsky Indianapolis Star

Published 2:34 p.m. ET Sep. 23, 2020 | Updated 2:14 p.m. ET Sep. 25, 2020

Nearly three months after suspending Indiana's reopening plan, Gov. Eric Holcomb on Wednesday announced the state will move to the final phase, Stage 5, Saturday, as the statewide mask order remains in place indefinitely.

Restaurants, bars, fitness centers and stores will now be able to operate at full capacity, but people will be expected to maintain social distance in these places and keep their masks on except while eating or drinking, he said.

Holcomb led with the reopening, good news to some, and then followed up with the continuation of the mask order, good news to others. Although he acknowledged that his preference would be not to wear face coverings, he said, doing so was essential to allowing the state to reopen safely.

What we learned: See highlights from the governor's coronavirus news conference this week

Lawsuit: More than a dozen bar, nightclub owners sue Indy over coronavirus restrictions

"We want to make sure we're doing all those little things that add up to make a big, big difference," he said.

Improvements in the state's positivity rate over recent months helped drive the decision to further open the state, Holcomb said. In July, the seven-day positivity rate for all tests was 6 to 6.5%, he said. Today, it's around 4%.

Holcomb also cited the state's relatively new color-coded metrics map, published weekly to track the viral spread in each county through the number of cases per capita and the positivity rate. The map rates each county along a blue-yellow-orange-red spectrum.

The majority of counties on this week's map are shaded blue, indicating the lowest rate of spread, he said. No counties fall in the most dangerous zone, red, and only Monroe and Gibson are colored orange.

"The numbers continue to track in the right direction," Holcomb said. "We have been very steady ... , very methodical about this, very data-driven, and that's how we will continue to be."

His announcement came about six weeks before Election Day, when Holcomb will face a challenge from Democrat Woody Myers, a trained physician who once served as Indiana's state health commissioner, and Libertarian Donald Rainwater.

A recent poll by Indy Politics and Change Research, however found that Rainwater appeared to be gaining support among voters on the far right, who disagree both with the shutdown and Holcomb's mask order.

Noting that Indiana recently had its highest one-day total of cases, Myers said in an emailed statement that he disagreed with Holcomb's decision to go forward. The move comes as public health officials are warning the nation could see cases spike once more as temperatures drop, Myers said.

"Moving to Phase 5 is the wrong step — we need more vigilance, not less," he said. The pandemic isn't going away anytime soon — Gov. Holcomb's decision today is simply wrong."

In three weeks, the state will re-evaluate and decide whether it's necessary to make any changes to the Back on Track plan, Holcomb said.

Individual counties, such as Marion, are allowed to have more stringent plans in place. Marion County only recently allowed bars and nightclubs to reopen with limits at 25% capacity indoors.

Indiana State Health Commissioner Dr. Kris Box said Wednesday that people should not interpret the state's decision as a sign that there's no longer a reason to take precautions such as washing hands, watching one's distance and wearing a mask.

"This map doesn't mean we're out of the woods," Box said, referring to the state's color-coded metrics graphic. "This is not a return to life the way we knew it in January."

Masks can play a critical role in helping to stop the spread of the virus, Box said, reiterating a message she sends every Wednesday during the governor's weekly press briefing.

Holcomb has said repeatedly that he views the state as managing its way through the pandemic, attempting to balance public health concerns with economic ones.

On the brink of reopening the state completely in July, Holcomb announced the creation of the Stage 4.5 plan, as other states around Indiana were seeing new cases soar.

Since that time, Indiana has seen its own average daily cases increase.

On July 4, the day that Stage 5 was initially projected to begin, the state was reporting about 440 cases a day. Today that number has nearly doubled. Since that time, Indiana has also increased the number of tests performed from around 9,000 to 15,000.

The number of people in the hospital with COVID-19 on that day was slightly over 600. Currently the number hovers around 800.

The average number of deaths each day from the coronavirus has not shifted dramatically from that time, hovering just under 10.

While Indiana is putting Stage 4.5 in its rear view mirror, at least for now, Holcomb said that the state will make some changes to the originally posted plan for Stage 5, when it posts the revised version at the end of the day Thursday.

One change that time has already made: The original Stage 5 documented allowed for the Indiana State Fair to resume. That will now have to wait at least another year.

Contact IndyStar reporter Shari Rudavsky at shari.rudavsky@indystar.com. Follow her on Facebook and on Twitter: @srudavsky.