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Member of the National League of Cities and the National Association of Counties

Commissioner Adam Crum  
Department of Health and Social Services  
State of Alaska  
3601 C Street, Suite 902  
Anchorage, Alaska 99503

September 16, 2021

Commissioner Crum,

I don't need to describe to you the concern with which we view the condition of this crisis – Alaska's recovery is materially threatened by the increase in COVID hospitalizations and deaths. Unified leadership is critical.

AML's members are as divided in their response as the rest of the state and nation, but there are also some commonsense actions that respond to the public health needs of the state, reflect the role and responsibility of your office and that of the Governor, and still respect local decision-making.

Here is what we would request of the State of Alaska, for your consideration; please provide a response justifying no action if the course is otherwise:

- Reinstitute the Unified Command to ensure continuity of government operations and interdepartmental expertise – convene weekly meetings with local government, school district, hospital, and business representatives
- Reinstitute regular meetings with Public Information Officers to assist in public outreach – let's make sure that communications from DHSS and elsewhere are shared, and local efforts amplified
- Improve contact tracing to remove any delays to slowing the spread of COVID-19 – to the extent that this is overwhelmed, reconsider how and when this is being used so that it can be prioritized by community and vulnerable population
- Improve testing capacity so that local governments have accurate and timely data – increased access to rapid testing will be beneficial to communities and businesses so that more stringent mitigation measures may be avoided
- Consider recommendations related to large events or congregate settings – while many events have been postponed or canceled, more uniform guidance from the State would be helpful
- Track and share death data by reporting period so that Alaskans can have a complete picture of what the other side of increased hospitalizations looks like
- If telehealth action, or background checks, are indeed relevant and helpful to improve hospital capacity, provide a path forward.
  - If the argument remains that even under a disaster declaration the Governor could not implement these actions, then provide legal analysis and an opportunity for us to dispute the diminishment of the Governor's authority

- Implement testing requirements from State airports into communities off the road system – the majority of local governments lack the capacity to implement their own measures
- Comply with local laws mitigating the spread of COVID-19, in all State facilities
- Implement mask requirements in all State facilities, where distancing isn't possible – this is a common requirement that local governments, schools, hospitals, and businesses have taken to ensure the safety of employees
- If capacity is an issue, consider the utility of National Guard deployment, with the condition that those currently serving on the frontlines are not called up
- Monitor and report out on all local and tribal mitigation measures and actions – ensure that the business community and travelers understand how that landscape is shifting in response to the pandemic
- Meet with AML members to discuss these and all policy efforts related to mitigation within and by the State of Alaska
- Provide projected vaccination status and trends by region, describing at what rate vaccination is occurring and by when vaccination above 70% (or a number determined by the State's Chief Medical Officer) should occur – knowing where we're at is one thing, understanding where we're headed or what we need to do to alter course is another
- Provide to all local governments a standardized mitigation plan that could be implemented at the discretion of the Council relative to specific data points in each community
  - It is okay for the State to say what should happen at different levels of this crisis, and to encourage local governments and others to make choices based on the epidemiological and other expertise that the State has access to and most local governments don't. Providing input into recommended mitigation measures, and at what point they should occur, does not interfere with local decision-making.
- Do not preempt local decisions related to workforce requirements – school districts, businesses, and local governments are taking actions in response to the threat they perceive and to support a return to normal operations as quickly as possible
- Provide and fund increased testing that allows for compliance with OSHA requirements of employers with more than 100 employees – whether the State challenges this or not, and for as much as we may be aggrieved at the overreach, we want to at least ensure that the burden of implementation is not borne by Alaska businesses and other employers
- Encourage the Governor to regularly correct misinformation that occurs amongst elected officials – not everyone has access to the depth of science and public health expertise that the State does, that the Governor has, and he can be a powerful communicator to address inaccuracy

Further, we ask that the State again consider issuing a disaster declaration. If it is not necessary to accomplish any of the list above, issue it at least to communicate to Alaskans that a declaration does not have to be heavy handed or evoke hard feelings. Reinstall faith in governments' response, such that when the need arises in future crises the Division of Emergency Management has the tools at its disposal to respond and Alaskans can rest assured in the State's ability to respond. If the State doesn't believe it is necessary, then its use can be limited. If it ends up being useful, all the better. At the very least, it conveys to hospitals that the State is willing to act, to school districts and local governments that they have that reinforcement as political subdivisions and aren't acting alone, and to businesses the support they need to enact decisions they choose to make in the interest of employees and customers.



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We would make one final point, when it comes to a disaster declaration – we firmly believe that the State has the opportunity to promote public health and enhance local control through carefully targeted mitigation efforts. State action doesn't have to be one size fits all. In fact, State mitigation efforts can be focused on data-driven decisions that are based on standards of response, similar to what individual communities have established.

Where vaccination rates are low, and cases high, consider the need for more extensive mitigation. Where mitigation plans are in place and effective, there are fewer reasons for State-level requirements. Where local governments have the necessary powers and resources, coordinate effectively. Tailor the State's response to the conditions and empower the State's public health team to help establish what that looks like. This ensures flexibility in the timing, too, so that action can be limited to help flatten the curve when needed, and reduced or removed as that threat recedes.

Commissioner, Alaska has an opportunity to make more choices than the debate provides – it is not us vs. them, mask vs. no mask, vaccine vs. no vaccine, disaster vs. no declaration. At this point, we know there is more nuance to decision-making than this. Please consider new ways for the State to be engaged in public health and COVID mitigation, in partnership with local governments, businesses, and so many others willing to make sure Alaskans are safe and Alaska resilient.

Respectfully,

Nils Andreassen  
Executive Director

Copied:

- Colonel Torrence Saxe, Commissioner, DMVA
- Bryan Fisher, Director, DHS&EM
- Anne Zink, Chief Medical Officer
- Joe McLaughlin, State Epidemiologist
- Heidi Hedberg, Director, Division of Public Health
- Randy Ruaro, Office of the Governor