



NATIONAL ADDRESS

COVID-19 RESPONSE UPDATE

**The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert A. Minnis
Prime Minister**

Monday 13 April 2020

**Office of the Prime Minister
Cecil Wallace-Whitfield Centre
West Bay Street**

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Good evening.

Following the Easter break and the most recent lockdown, I want to give you an update on where we are in our fight against COVID-19.

I also want to talk with you about the way forward during the coming week and the weeks and months ahead. We are making progress.

Our physical distancing measures, curfews and lockdowns are having an effect.

But we still have a long way to go.

We must and we will remain vigilant.

Now is not the time to let down our guard.

There will be no complacency on the part of your Government.

We must remain on full alert.

As a medical doctor, I know full well that patients recover best after they have gone through their full course of antibiotic medication, therapy and proper rest.

We will not recover properly unless we are disciplined in applying the right and necessary measures to restore our country to better health.

I continue to thank the Bahamian people for their fortitude for their patience, and our collective determination to work together during this time.

The Government has a full, comprehensive and vigorous response to COVID-19 which includes: health agencies, social services, finance, NIB, the uniformed branches and every ministry and agency of government.

Through the National Coordinating Committee, we are working with the private sector, the non-profit community and others to fight this threat to our lives, to our social well-being and to our economy and livelihoods.

I wish to make a strong appeal to my fellow medical doctors in private practice to help us in the fight against COVID-19.

We all took a solemn oath to save and to protect human lives. During this hour of great need, I urge more of my former colleagues to join in this fight. We need every health professional available to fight this grave threat.

It is with abundant gratitude that I thank all of those who are a part of our citizen army working in solidarity to save and to protect life, and to help others in this time of need.

Let me also inform you that we are carefully monitoring what other countries and jurisdictions are doing. We are learning what is working and what is not working in other places.

Fellow Bahamian and Residents:

I wish to begin by providing you with a health update. Health Officials will provide a further update and details tomorrow.

It has been approximately one month since the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported in The Bahamas.

Earlier today, the Ministry of Health reported two additional confirmed cases of COVID-19, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in The Bahamas to 49, as of Monday the 13th of April, 2020. Eight of the COVID-19 positive patients have died.

The patients who have succumbed to COVID-19 were older in age and had significant comorbidities or conditions that are known to cause a poor outcome in COVID-19.

These conditions include: essential hypertension, asthma, obesity and malignancy or cancer. These underlying conditions led to dire outcomes as well as to the severity of their infections and pneumonias.

Several of these patients were intubated and supported with critical care but were unable to recover.

There are additional factors related to those who have been tested for the SARS-coronavirus-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) in The Bahamas to date.

Health officials have been prioritizing testing to individuals with moderate and severe disease. This is the case because of the real challenges related to testing limitations in the face of the global shutdown.

This means that as testing expands, more people will be diagnosed with COVID-19 in The Bahamas, including those with mild symptoms.

The Ministry of Health plans to expand testing this week. This will result in an increase in the number of cases.

Health officials are closely monitoring the case numbers as this will inform where we are in the surge.

As we get a broader picture of the true extent of COVID-19 in The Bahamas, this data should reflect that the case fatality rate is indeed lower.

Information from the field is also informing us that some populations are particularly hard hit and have higher mortality rates from COVID-19.

Our health team is continuing to compile information on the COVID-19 outbreak in The Bahamas that will help to guide our health strategy, including measures like curfews and lockdowns.

We continue to strategize and act to manage COVID-19 to the best of our ability, to prevent a surge in cases and to prevent the loss of countless lives.

I understand the many burdens associated with the curfews and lockdowns, including for the poorest and more vulnerable in our society.

I understand the mental health challenges, the loneliness, the difficulties, problems and anxiety caused by various measures.

But rest assured that we have put in place these restrictions and guidelines to save lives.

The more you abide by physical distancing, by wearing masks and by staying at home, the quicker we can ease restrictions at the appropriate time.

I wish to announce that the South Beach Clinic was prepared for operation as a COVID-19 facility on Sunday the 12th of April.

When fully operational, this facility will be able to accommodate an additional 10 COVID-19 patients.

Fellow Bahamian and Residents:

I want to discuss the shopping schedule with you. This is a work in progress and we will continue to work to improve the schedule.

I am grateful for your suggestions and ideas.

We also need your patience and your cooperation.

We will make adjustments as events warrant.

The shopping schedule is designed to limit the spread of the virus and to ensure that Bahamians and residents have the time to purchase food. We are trying to balance these goals as carefully as possible.

As we continue to improve how the shopping schedule works and balance the need to limit community spread and the need for people to get food, we are temporarily suspending the food shopping alphabetical schedule.

Because of the short week we are in this week, the alphabetical shopping schedule will be temporarily suspended effective tomorrow, Tuesday, April 14th through Friday, April 17th.

An alphabetical shopping schedule will come back into effect on Monday the 20th of April.

Grocery stores will be open from 6am to 7pm.

The time from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. Monday to Friday will be reserved for seniors and persons with disabilities.

Police will be present at major stores to support physical distancing measures.

Effective immediately, during the weekend lockdowns, grocery stores will be allowed to operate on Saturdays from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. for essential workers only.

The schedule for essential workers is as follows:

On Saturdays, from 6 a.m. to 12 Noon, health professionals, police and defence force officers, employees of clearing banks and employees of wholesale distributors will be allowed to shop.

From 12 Noon to 6 p.m. remaining essential workers, as identified in the Emergency Powers (Lockdown) Order will have access to food stores.

That includes essential workers of core utilities such as water, electricity and communications, the media, security company workers, department of correctional facilities, customs, immigration, social services, environmental health services, waste disposal and sanitation workers, fire services and NIB.

Pharmacies will also be allowed to operate on Saturdays until 3 p.m. for essential workers only.

All pharmacies and food stores should have hand sanitizer available for use by all staff.

Food stores are required to have hand sanitizer available for all individuals entering the establishment.

In addition to wholesale bakeries and water producers, wholesale food suppliers will also be allowed to operate during the lockdowns to allow for re-stocking.

Fellow Bahamians and residents:

On Saturday past I had a teleconference with owners of the major food store outlets.

They have assured me that their stores are well-stocked.

There is enough food for everyone.

There is no need to panic buy.

There is enough food.

I also wish to remind you that because of expiration dates on food, to be careful about stockpiling food.

You do not wish to make yourself and your family sick by consuming food that has expired.

I encourage store owners to design a system for their stores that works best.

For example, in some stores on New Providence and Grand Bahama a ticketing system appears to be working well.

This is a process other food stores may wish to adopt.

If store owners find that their customers are having difficulty practicing physical distancing while standing in line to enter a store, please consider using a number or ticket system that allows individuals to wait in their vehicles until their number is called.

This system is working well at some establishments, but what works well at some stores may not necessarily work well at others.

We encourage individual store owners to adopt systems that make sense and work for their specific establishments and that ensure physical distancing protocols are being followed.

Store owners should enforce the shopping schedule when it is in effect, and should enforce the physical distancing protocols. Store owners should also ensure that their employees are wearing the appropriate protective equipment.

Fellow Bahamian and Residents:

We are just coming out of a five-day lockdown and I know that it has been difficult. But it is important that we continue to adhere to the guidelines set out to protect us all.

If you do not need to go to the food store tomorrow, please consider waiting until another day. This will help you to avoid lines and to protect your

health and the health of others. There is no perfect system during times such as these.

But let us all work together to design the best system possible.

The Government is monitoring the development of this COVID-19 virus moment by moment and will continue to make adjustments when necessary.

Our goal is to protect you and to save lives.

The point of the shopping schedule is to reduce the number of people moving around at any given time.

It's important to limit the amount of time that you are interacting with others.

We want to ensure that everyone is practicing physical distancing.

That means that you are at least 6 feet away from anyone around you at all times.

This reduces the chance that you will become infected with COVID-19 if someone near you is infected with the virus.

I wish to remind you that you should travel with an ID at all times.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Innovation and trying new things are an essential part of what we must do at this time.

If you are able, I want you to consider using reputable online grocery delivery services as a way to remain physically distant and to receive the items you need for day-to-day life. Some of these services have emerged in popularity during this time.

I encourage Bahamians to continue creating more online delivery and pick-up options for food.

It is unclear how long this restricted period will last.

The COVID-19 virus and how we respond will determine a number of timelines.

However, commerce still needs to happen.

People still need food, medicine, water and other goods.

The more we create online ordering, payment and delivery options, the more we keep our domestic economy functioning while also reducing lines at stores.

There is a major opportunity that exists for businesses that creates easy-to-use online payment and delivery options.

I advise companies that have been slow to this to see how they can retool their operations to meet the challenges of these times.

Online service portals will make your businesses viable now, and will give you an advantage after the crisis.

To further stimulate domestic economic activity and manufacturing, the Government announced last week a ban on the import of non-medical masks in order to help develop local industry

The import of non-medical protective face masks was prohibited, effective 8 a.m., Friday, 10 April, 2020.

This does not apply to the importation of medical-grade masks for health care workers.

All mask orders made before Friday 10 April will be allowed. Proof of the date that masks were ordered is required.

Orders of 10 masks or less for personal use are still allowed.

Requests for special exemptions may be made in writing to the Competent Authority, Office of the Prime Minister.

I wish to remind the country that under the Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No.2) (Amendment), every person who leaves their residence must wear a mask covering their nose and mouth while away from their residence.

Fellow Bahamian and Residents:

I wish to announce this evening that the Government will shortly appoint a Food Security Taskforce with a Chairperson.

This Taskforce will ensure that every Bahamian and resident who needs food is provided with adequate food.

This is a major and fundamental priority.

The Taskforce will also make recommendations to increase food production in The Bahamas, including through BAMSI, farmers' markets, backyard and community gardens and other ways of producing and distributing food in the short- medium- and long-term.

I will have more to say about domestic food production in the weeks ahead. Such production will play a significant role in stimulating our domestic economy.

Because of our high rate of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension and the very high level of obesity in the country, we will aggressively promote healthier eating, nutrition and physical activity.

The current range of health problems in our country and the resulting impact on immune systems, is playing a significant and determining role in how our bodies can deal with the effects of the COVID-19 virus.

In the medium- and long-term we have to resolutely address the health problem in our country, including mental health and well-being.

The Ministry of Health knew that due to the COVID-19 pandemic there would be a need for the Government to facilitate access to food and food supplies to our population already at risk for food insecurity and hunger.

Additionally, these measures were also needed to help those at-risk for hunger due to loss of income and employment.

While the Ministry of Social Services is providing food vouchers and the National Insurance Board is providing some assistance for those previously engaged in the formal tourism economy, it was understood that there would be additional food needs for those who were outside of the formal economy or who would not apply or qualify for certain assistance.

Therefore, the Ministry of Health brought together governmental and non-governmental agencies, along with private sector companies, to examine the issue of food insecurity and to mobilize resources to mitigate the challenge.

Those initially engaged included NEMA, the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness, Management and Reconstruction, Ministry of Social

Services, Hands for Hunger, Great Commissions Ministry, the Bahamas Red Cross, the Head Knowles Foundation, and IDEA Relief.

Private sector donors have included Atlantis Resorts, Baha Mar Resorts, and other known and anonymous donors inside and outside of the hotel sector.

Through their combined efforts, fresh produce, cooked meals, grocery packets and other food supplies have been delivered directly to those in need in Abaco, Grand Bahama, Eleuthera, and New Providence.

In the last seven days, the Bahamas Feeding Network distributed \$40,000 in food vouchers and between \$10,000 and \$15,000 in food parcels

Hands for Hunger has distributed 50,000 lbs. of donated food: \$5,000 in Non-perishables and are budgeting about \$20,000 for food vouchers.

We encourage others to donate food.

The Food Security Taskforce will indicate how such donations can be made.

I also note that the Cabinet is reviewing the proposed Rental Assistance program which we will announce once finalized.

I know that many Bahamians are concerned about their finances and are scared about what the future holds.

I know that many of you are still waiting on unemployment and other assistance.

I assure you that we are working around-the-clock to get you the helping hands and the assistance you need.

We are going to help you!

We will help you!

Fellow Bahamian and Residents:

I wish to advise you that we are consulting locally and internationally to help guide our social and economic response once the immediate health problems are arrested.

At the appropriate time I will announce both an economic and a social development high-level group to offer recommendations on the way forward.

I also note that we are consulting with Bahamian academics, historians and researchers, who are looking at the historical record and our National Archives to help give us greater perspective.

Fellow Bahamian and Residents:

We want to continue to provide you with as much information as accurately and quickly as possible,

But we need your help, your ideas, your suggestions and your input.

The Office of the Prime Minister is working on setting up a COVID-19 Suggestions and Questions platform on its website, opm.gov.bs.

This will provide a central point of contact to submit non-health related suggestions and questions.

Please look out for more information on our Facebook page – Office of the Prime Minister – The Bahamas to find out when this platform will go live.

Fellow Bahamian and Residents:

This is the most difficult stretch our country has faced in living memory.

Bahamians are sick and some have died.

Many jobs have been lost as the global economy has slowed to a near halt.

The stress of the times wears on us all.

There are fears of sickness.

There are financial fears and woes.

Though the challenges are daunting, do not give in to hopelessness and despair.

We will overcome this crisis together.

This is a time to set aside divisions.

We are not in this camp or that camp.

We are not supporters of this group or the next.

We are Bahamians.

We are creative.

We are resilient.

We are a people who overcome.

To prevail we will have to pursue new paths in our social development and economy.

We will have to find new ways to give aid to those who lost everything.

I am confident we will thrive again because I believe in you.

Our people are our greatest natural resource.

It was you who built the most dynamic tourism economy in the Caribbean.

We have achieved Olympic Gold.

We have endured and flourished during almost a half a century of independence as a proud, sovereign people.

Your hard work, your ideas and tenacity will build a better Bahamas for the next stage of our history.

I have hope because we are a remarkable people.

You should have hope too.

In his Easter Message, the Archbishop of Canterbury said:

“There needs to be a resurrection of our common life, something that links to the old, but is different and more beautiful.”

A former patient told me yesterday, that despite not being able to celebrate Easter in the traditional ways we have come to appreciate and to love – including going to church and the Sunday Easter meal – that this Easter was very spiritually rich.

She said it was more meaningful in many ways because she and her family were able to celebrate what was most important and essential.

They celebrated the Risen Lord!

They celebrated the love they have for each other!

They celebrated their love for our Bahamas!

They celebrated the gift of life and life abundantly!

We are a resurrection people!

In the midst of the suffering and pain of the moment, let us remain steadfast in hope and continue to look to the Light of Christ and the light within ourselves and within each other.

May the God of Hope continue to grant to us the gift of new life and light.

Thank you and good evening.
