



ISSUE ANALYSIS

Near-Term Proposals as Georgia Tackles COVID-19

Compiled by the Georgia Public Policy Foundation

Introduction

Good policy is always a good idea, but its necessity becomes even clearer in times of crisis. During the present public health emergency, the Georgia Public Policy Foundation is determined to continue equipping policymakers and the public with the information and ideas they need to evaluate policy changes that would help all Georgians through this challenge. As this pandemic continues to spread across the state, additional resources will be required not only to assist healthcare providers on the frontlines of this crisis, but to mitigate its overall economic impact and stabilize the delivery of essential goods and services in communities.

With that in mind, and after seeking advice and input from our network of Senior Fellows as well as colleagues and peers around the country, we have compiled a list of policy ideas that could be implemented immediately by Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp and his administration to alleviate hardships now.

Through executive order, the governor has already implemented measures the Foundation [previously identified](#) as necessary to bolster our healthcare delivery system. These include removing “certificate of need” barriers to expanding healthcare facilities and services and to new capital expenditures by hospitals, as well as expediting licensing of physicians, nurses and pharmacists who are in good standing with other states and wish to aid with healthcare delivery in Georgia. Beyond healthcare, he has acted to facilitate increased commercial freight and the delivery of vital goods by lifting the “hours of service” mandate on truck drivers during this emergency period.

As this pandemic evolves and we gain a better understanding of the state’s needs, the Foundation anticipates that many additional, short-term measures will be necessary for adoption during, and only until the expiration of, the governor’s public health emergency declaration.

Healthcare

Beyond several sound steps the Kemp administration has already taken in healthcare policy, additional policies may help alleviate the burden on providers as the pandemic continues.

- Implement the practice and licensure laws already implemented by over 20 states and allow nurse practitioners to evaluate patients; diagnose, order and interpret diagnostic tests; and to initiate and manage treatments, including prescribing certain medications. Do the same for other workers such as advanced practice registered nurses, provided that their new authorized duties do not exceed their education and training.
- Follow the lead of Florida, which recently passed a bill allowing pharmacists to test for and treat ailments including strep throat and influenza. This will divert some patients from hospital and physicians' offices, where healthcare workers are already overtaxed and where patients run a greater risk of contracting COVID-19.
- Consider options to deploy the state's underutilized hygienists and technicians to immediately bridge the shortfall of additional healthcare professionals, in light of the CDC's recommendation to postpone routine dental and eyecare visits.
- Address the lack of available hospital beds by temporarily appropriating, on an as-needed basis, unused state government buildings to serve as provisional healthcare facilities. Consider arrangements with privately owned buildings that may also be available, including facilities dedicated solely to elective surgeries, vacant structures and unused or underused hotels.
- Utilize public universities' lab workers and facilities to expand processing of COVID-19 tests to alleviate a key bottleneck.
- Delineate which vital needs can be better addressed and expedited by the private sector. Industry needs to be creative in the reallocation of their available resources to address supply-chain needs like masks, gowns and ventilators. Meanwhile, churches and other local non-governmental organizations could help coordinate support services including childcare and grocery shopping in their community for essential personnel on the frontlines such as nurses, doctors and first responders.

Education

With regular classroom work disrupted for weeks, if not months, it is essential that Georgia's children not lose a quarter of a school year. Remote learning resources and tools once considered optional are now vital. State government should focus on clarifying that student learning progress is still important and that there will be accountability even as standardized tests are

being cancelled. It should also ensure public school districts learn from best practices from around the state and nation and implement remote learning plans as broadly and effectively as possible.

- Direct the state Department of Education to develop guidelines for public school districts to share publicly the following: plans for implementing remote learning; procedures and metrics for evaluating teacher effectiveness and student progress via remote learning; and resources and contingencies to help students who may lack necessary devices and/or internet connectivity to participate in remote learning. Include in these guidelines lessons learned and best practices from around the country, such as the plan developed by [Success Academy Charter Schools in New York](#).
- Further direct the Department of Education to evaluate districts' use of remote learning and to compile observed best practices among the districts. Make these best practices publicly available and urge districts to implement them.
- Urgently seek opportunities to build on innovations such as Google's "Rolling Study Halls" program, which equips school buses in some Georgia counties with WiFi so they can be parked near clusters of students who lack internet connectivity. In areas where similarly equipped school buses are not available, pursue alternatives such as GRTA commuter buses and private motor coaches.

Fiscal Policy

The large surpluses of recent state budgets are surely gone, at least in the short term. State government must be creative in order to provide relief where possible, while living within its reduced means. Tax increases should be avoided in all circumstances, as the burden will fall on individuals and businesses already struggling mightily. The state should be ready to make prudent use of its ample "rainy day fund"; after all, it's "raining." Note that some proposals may prove unnecessary, depending on the relief package the federal government finalizes.

- To facilitate transportation for transit-dependent workers who may not be able, or willing, to continue using mass transit, suspend the collection of sales taxes and other fees on taxis and ride-sharing services.
- Consider suspending or delaying the collection of unemployment-insurance taxes from employers for up to three months, to help address liquidity concerns for small businesses.
- Implement at least a one-day furlough for all state employees, including public school teachers, to be taken by the end of FY2020. This will help offset lower tax revenues and address liquidity concerns for the state government.

Transportation

While traffic congestion in metro Atlanta has eased as Georgians reduce their trips from home, there are still needs to reduce bureaucratic burdens and keep our vital logistics industry moving.

- Allow a one-time, temporary extension of driver's licenses not eligible for online renewal. Allow out-of-state licenses to remain valid up to 60 days beyond the current 30-day limit for new Georgia residents.
- Expand available overnight parking for commercial truck drivers as truck-stop lots are overcrowded and hotels continue to close. Work with school districts, retailers and others with large, underused parking lots to create new, temporary parking.
- Petition the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration for authority to extend medical-card renewals for CDL holders for at least 90 days. Currently drivers coming due for a physical are finding doctors are unwilling to see them for a variety reasons related to COVID-19. States have the authority to extend CDL renewal dates but not the authority to extend medical certification renewal dates.

Regulation

As public-health orders ground much of the economy to a halt, the need has never been greater for government to minimize its hindrance of private enterprise in those sectors still open for business. As long as it is possible and feasible, state government should defer to local governments to enact tailored, responsible policies, and assist where necessary.

- Collaborate with private companies to develop protocols for evaluating the health of delivery workers to maintain commerce and ensure adequate supplies of food, medicine and household goods. Example: Require retailers and restaurants to record the body temperatures of delivery drivers and, as soon as practicable, require periodic testing of them for COVID-19. To encourage compliance, ensure adequate privacy safeguards and, to the extent possible, sick-leave policies for the drivers being tested.
- Lift local government restrictions and obstructive permitting processes for people who are willing and able to work from home when their job is no threat to public safety or encumbrance in a neighborhood.
- Prioritize COVID-19 emergency response needs for the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority's loans to local governments, with stringent, expedited processing.
- Allow charitable organizations to distribute homemade sandwiches to the needy, in line with a bill addressing the Department of Public Health's interference in such programs last year. Go further than the bill by omitting any seasonal or other time constraints on this charitable practice.

- Support Georgia Congressmen Doug Collins and Austin Scott in [urging the immediate resumption](#) of U.S. visa processing for seasonal agricultural workers. Georgia's farmers are only just recovering from Hurricane Michael and can't afford to lose another crop.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis requires extraordinary collaboration between the private and public sectors to address the healthcare needs of our communities, while assisting small businesses and corporations in this time of economic uncertainty. It is essential that the state continue working to ease systematic and regulatory burdens, which will better allow providers to practice to the best of their abilities. And it is imperative that Georgia continue upon the path of sound policies to work toward brighter days ahead.

About the Georgia Public Policy Foundation: Established in 1991, the Foundation is a trusted, independent resource for voters and elected officials. The Foundation provides actionable solutions to real-life problems by bringing people together.

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