

Forum

EDITORIAL

Federal response is needed, or states are going to suffer

Ohio's unemployment claims spiked nearly 28-fold last week compared with the prior week, following Gov. Mike DeWine's coronavirus-related order closing bars, restaurants and a number of other nonessential businesses. The soaring jobless numbers — with 134,653 new claims filed from March 15 to March 19, compared to 4,815 in the equivalent period a week before — were sobering but instructive about the challenges facing Ohio and the nation.

With DeWine's orders since expanded to all nonessential businesses, the economic fallout is likely to get far worse — even as confirmed COVID-19 cases, and deaths, continue to climb.

It's a sign that fighting COVID-19 can no longer simply be outsourced to the states. This crisis requires a far stronger federal response.

The federal government needs to step up most urgently to do two things: protect our frontline health care workers with essential protective gear, and ensure that COVID-19 testing capacity continues to accelerate, a process complicated by the international supply chain for chemical reagents, testing swabs, pipettes and other items now in short supply.

It's unconscionable not to do everything possible to protect our frontline medical and safety workers who daily expose themselves to the virus with inadequate face masks, eye protection, and other gear.

At Tuesday's Ohio coronavirus briefing, Dr. Amy Acton, head of the Ohio Department of Health, revealed that 16.1 percent of all confirmed COVID-19 cases in Ohio were of health care workers. That is deeply alarming. Changing this picture is critical, including in Cleveland and Northeast Ohio, with its concentration of major health care providers, workers, and medical and nursing students.

At the same time, continuing to expand testing is critical to identify cases and isolate carriers, and thus be in a position to reduce the blunt instrument of large-scale business closures already threatening to bring the economy to its knees.

Given these obstacles, there is an obvious way both to protect medical workers and boost COVID-19 testing.

It's unconscionable not to do everything possible to protect our frontline medical and safety workers who daily expose themselves to the virus with inadequate face masks, eye protection, and other gear.

President Donald Trump has rightly invoked the Defense Production Act in this crisis, a law passed in 1950 at the start of the Korean War to help mobilize industrial production in support of the war effort. COVID-19 is no less of a war — one that, if not aggressively managed now, could lead to far more lasting long-term economic damage.

It's critical the Defense Production Act be used aggressively, not simply to encourage businesses to contribute to the COVID-19 fight, but also to take us to a true wartime footing, to ramp up production of face masks, respirators and other medical protective gear, along with ventilators, and also to make sure we have the reagents and other chemicals and supplies needed to keep expanding COVID-19 testing.

Without such measures, Ohio and other states will continue to have to bid against each other and the federal government for increasingly scarce gear, reagents and other supplies.

Without such measures, states like Ohio — which has already announced a cutback in state testing for lack of sufficient reagents — will have to curtail testing even more at this critical moment, threatening to blunt other public health tools.

Congress also needs to act, and Ohio's senators, Democrat Sherrod Brown and Republican Rob Portman, are in a position to take the bipartisan lead on this, to help avert what some economists are calling the "doom loop," a widening series of small-business closures that could not only threaten the jobless benefits system in Ohio (already inadequately funded) and other states, but also push us into a major recession that will make recovery harder.

After DeWine last Friday issued his stay-at-home order for all except workers at a specific list of essential businesses, Cleveland-area experts urged immediate federal help and congressional action — either in the form of direct assistance or low- or no-interest loans — to head off a new level of layoffs that could ground our economy, exhaust state unemployment benefits and make recovery harder to achieve.

No one has a crystal ball, but the current reality leaves no doubt: America is at a turning point. It is time to ramp up anti-COVID-19 efforts starting at the top to mobilize our powerful economy both to save lives and our futures, by changing the trajectory of the economic-impact curve as well as of the coronavirus pandemic curve.

Tell us your story

At this extraordinary time, we are seeking essays from individuals on how coronavirus is affecting them. We are looking for people with stories to tell about the humanity, the grit, the soul of this moment in ways that transcend the news of the day.

We seek distinguished storytelling, the universal in the particular, but we're also looking for more than just narrative writing. We will consider poetry, graphic art, and other voices at this all-consuming moment.

Please keep submissions to 650 words or fewer, email to forum@cleveland.com and include "CORONAVIRUS MY STORY" in the subject line.

COMMENTARY

Two deadly misconceptions about the coronavirus

No one is immune, and you can spread it without having any symptoms

Ashwini Sehgal

The worldwide pandemic caused by the coronavirus has led Gov. Mike DeWine to close all nonessential businesses, order people not in these workplaces to stay at home apart from needed runs to the grocery store, etc., and to urge us to stay at least 6 feet away from other people whenever possible. But there are two misconceptions about the necessity of these public health measures that may hamper their effectiveness.

First, many people point out that there are tens of thousands of deaths from the flu in the United States every year. So why are we so concerned about the 600 or so American deaths so far from coronavirus?

There are important differences between the flu and the coronavirus. Many of us have some immunity to the flu as a result of flu vaccines or previous illnesses with similar flu strains. Last year, 10 percent of Americans, or about 35 million people, developed a symptomatic flu illness. About one out of every 1,000 individuals who get the flu die as a result. That is what we saw last year, as about 35,000 Americans died from the flu.

By contrast, no one is immune to the coronavirus, so 100 percent of the population may be susceptible. The mortality rate also appears to be higher, with an early estimate of about 1 out of every 100 infected individuals dying, although comprehensive data is currently lacking. This combination of 10 times more susceptible people and a 10 times higher mortality rate means that 3.5 million Americans might die from the new coronavirus. Deaths on this scale would have a catastrophic effect on our families, society and economy.

Second, there is a misconception that adhering to public health measures such as social distancing is mainly a way to protect yourself from getting sick. This can lead some to ignore public health recommendations based on their individual risk perceptions.

A college student told me that DeWine's early orders on social distancing didn't really apply to him because "young, healthy people don't get very sick even if they get coronavirus." An elderly relative said that he has "already lived a full life and is OK with whatever happens." A middle-aged neighbor said she would continue mingling with others because she "doesn't want to live in fear."

These understandable comments miss a key goal of public health measures, which is to limit person-to-person transmission of coronavirus across an entire population.

Many individuals with coronavirus infection have no or minimal symptoms but are still capable of transmitting to others.

Coronavirus can also be transmitted during the several-day incubation period between exposure to the virus and onset of symptoms. There is no practical way



to know if someone has an asymptomatic infection, has a mild infection, or is in an incubation period. In the absence of drugs to treat coronavirus or vaccines to prevent infection, public health measures are the only effective method to limit the spread of coronavirus.

So even if you are too healthy, too old, or too brave to worry about coronavirus, it is worth doing your part to protect your family, neighbors, and community.

Similar measures to limit contact within populations appear to be effective in other countries that have used them. For example, the number of new cases in China has decreased from a peak of 2,000 per day to less than 20 in recent days, apart from imported cases.

Limiting the spread of coronavirus across the population is especially important for people in essential jobs who can't work at home, such as police, bus drivers, and supermarket workers. Those of us who can work from home should do what we can to limit the risks to those who can't.

Limiting spread is also important for people with compromised immune systems for whom any infection can be life-threatening. In addition, health providers and hospitals will buckle if inundated with large numbers of sick patients with coronavirus infections. Moderating the numbers of infected individuals is essential to maintain our health care system (as well as a functioning economy).

The coronavirus pandemic is a big deal. We all need to work together both for our own health and for the well-being of all Ohioans.

Dr. Ashwini Sehgal is a physician in Westlake.

One of the busiest freeway interchanges in Ohio, Interstates 70, 71, and Ohio 315, appear almost empty Monday morning as business and social lives shut down due to COVID-19. The state issued a stay-at-home order. *Doral Chenoweth, The Columbus Dispatch*

COMMENTARY

I survived solitary confinement. You can survive self-isolating.

Jason Rezaian *Washington Post*

Over the past several days, as many people began confronting the reality that they'd have to stay holed up at home for the foreseeable future, friends around the world reached out to me for advice. They wanted tips on how to deal with prolonged social isolation.

Suddenly my own experience of being held for 544 days, including in solitary confinement, in Iran's Evin Prison has become more relevant than I ever imagined possible.

While the self-imposed isolation we're going through is vastly different from the harsh conditions of prison, prolonged captivity did teach me a few useful lessons about how to make the best of it. So here are a few pieces of advice:

Don't spend all your time online:

You thought you spent a lot of time on the internet before? That was nothing. And if you're active on social media, as many of us are, it's going to be hard to step off that merry-go-round.

Let's not fool ourselves: We aren't going to completely unplug. But I strongly suggest spending as much time away from the internet and television as possible, especially when you're not working.

During the 544 days I spent in prison, I never had a chance to go online, not even for a moment. Throughout my long ordeal, the inability to access information felt like the greatest deprivation of all.

In retrospect, though, it wasn't all bad.

Read books:

After I was released from solitary confinement after 49 days, I was allowed some small privileges. The one that I quickly realized was the most indispensable was access to books. Reading was a wonderful mental escape from my grim surroundings. It also connected me to the outside world.

Exercise:

You might not think it's possible because you don't have a Peloton at home.

No matter how small your living space is, though, you probably have enough room to walk. If possible, take the stairs. That's what I'm doing. All three flights of them.

Early in my imprisonment, an urge to move kicked in. So I walked. Sometimes for hours on end each day, even when I was held in solitary confinement in a cell that was only about eight and a half feet in length.

Plan for the future:

There were many days in prison that I thought it would never end. You may feel something similar in the weeks ahead, or you might have that feeling already. But this will pass.

Laugh:

My last (but by far most important) piece of advice is to find as much as you can to laugh about each day. I promise you there are opportunities all around you. If I could find them in solitary, you can find them in your living room.

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