



**TESTIMONY ON
PLANS TO REOPEN PENNSYLVANIA**

Presented to the Senate Local Government Committee
and the Senate Health and Human Services Committee

By
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On behalf of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP), representing all 67 counties in the commonwealth, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this joint hearing about reopening Pennsylvania in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our local county officials continue to provide steadfast front-line response to the COVID-19 outbreak and have been doing so since the virus hit Pennsylvania early in March. Throughout the declaration of disaster emergency, counties across the commonwealth have been unwavering leaders in public health response and assuring that critical services continue to be provided to their communities in a time of great uncertainty and need.

For instance, caseworkers are continuing to investigate child abuse. We continue to see increased need for mental health and substance abuse services. Several counties still own their own nursing homes and are working to protect their residents and their employees. Election directors are working overtime to process an unprecedented number of mail-in ballot applications and to protect the health of voters and poll workers during the June 2 primary. Counties are working to maintain the health and safety of our jails. On behalf of CCAP, I want to take a moment to share our gratitude for our members – the county officials and the county staff all across this commonwealth – who are delivering vital services and serving on the front lines of the nation’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Above all, our counties continue to be committed to developing solutions, working together with their local health providers, emergency responders, business community and residents to figure out how we to move forward in the face of these challenges. With that in mind, we must stress the need to include county leaders in any and all decision-making that will impact their service provision and recovery efforts.

Our Association has not taken a position on the Governor’s plan to reopen Pennsylvania, nor any other proposed plan that has been offered in recent weeks. Our position, on behalf of our 67 counties, is simply this – a comprehensive, collaborative process must be developed that brings counties, the legislature and the administration to the table to *collectively* determine what is best for the health, safety and economy of the residents of the commonwealth.

Too often since this pandemic started, counties have been left on the sidelines, whether in developing criteria for opening or closing businesses or providing metrics for their safe operation, or figuring out how to share data that will inform our first responders and allow them to prioritize the use of scarce PPE, or determining how or if counties will be able to access federal stimulus aid to address the emergency expenses they too have seen. The value of counties’ on-the-ground knowledge and impacts of state and federal proposals have been no more than an afterthought, leaving counties frustrated and struggling to get answers to questions, and to figure out what roles and responsibilities we have been handed and what to tell our constituents.

We have to stop creating solutions *for* counties. We must start creating solutions *with* counties.

This is about protecting the health and safety of our residents. It is about trying to create a new normal for our communities. It is about economic recovery and keeping the safety net intact for citizens who are scared and lonely and in need of our help. It is not about political differences and it is not about whether one level of government or one branch of government is right or wrong or should get credit for having the answers.

It shouldn't be a matter of us versus them, and counties shouldn't be caught in the middle. It should be about us, all of us, versus this virus.

Counties can be strong partners with the state in providing important services to the residents and communities of Pennsylvania, and we want these efforts to be successful. We have an opportunity to take action that can be collaborative and positive. But to do that, we need the trust of our partners and we need better communication and cooperation as decisions are being made, rather than after; for instance, the current version of SB 327 would set up a task force on COVID-19 recovery on which counties should also have a seat. We need to think about regional collaboration to make these determinations carefully with intergovernmental as well as interbranch input, so that counties can be directly involved and provide local perspective about their communities as recovery plans are developed and implemented. We also need to have access to accurate data and information that accounts for potential impacts that expand beyond county borders. Anything less, and we will only see divisions continue to grow as everyone tries to go it alone, leading to a less than desirable result for the people we all represent.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

