

**Open Letter from the Massachusetts Coalition for Health Equity to Governor
Charlie Baker Regarding Safe Reopening of the Commonwealth of
Massachusetts**

May 13, 2020

Governor Charlie Baker
Office of the Governor
24 Beacon St., Room 280
Boston, MA 02133

CC:
Secretary Marylou Sudders
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
One Ashburton Place, 11th Floor
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Governor Baker and Secretary Sudders:

We are writing on behalf of the Massachusetts Coalition for Health Equity, a group of over 400 healthcare professionals, public health and community leaders to express profound concern about your plan to reduce public health safeguards and reopen workplaces in Massachusetts on May 18, 2020. Massachusetts residents have been waiting for two months to go back to work. The economy must be restarted as soon as possible. But we must concur with [Boston Infectious Disease specialists](#) in stating that the conditions to do so safely are currently not in place. Residents of our Commonwealth should not have to choose between earning a living and protecting our health and our life.

Not only the staggering 5,108 death toll in Massachusetts as of May 13th, but also the emerging understanding of prolonged disability in many convalescents of COVID-19 and of impacts on children, demand that appropriate protections in all workplaces and in all public spaces are in place before employees and the public are asked to spend our days in these environments.

We are concerned about the absence of three critical determinants of a successful emergence from the current first wave of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth. In addition to insufficient testing and the absence of objective benchmarks that can indicate readiness to reopen, we note the lack of representation of essential workers and of the most affected communities on your Reopening Advisory Board and a dearth of medical and public health experts. In its current

composition, this panel, which skews overwhelmingly toward CEOs and business representatives, lacks the expertise and perspective necessary to successfully reopen our state.

Regarding point one, testing and benchmarks, we observe that testing in Massachusetts has not achieved the scope and has not shown the decrease in new infections set by your advisors in the Massachusetts High Technology Council. Their [briefing of May 5th](#) finds that sufficient testing is indicated by a 3% positive test rate, while Massachusetts had a 14% positive test rate on May 11th. Linked to sufficient testing capacity, a benchmark is also needed to trigger re-closure if opening leads to a spike of new infections. A country which has successfully managed the pandemic, Germany, has defined a trigger of 50 new infections over 7 days per 100,000 residents of a district, to reverse their reopening. Such a trigger needs to be specified in advance before the state reopens.

Point two, as our group has argued, we must prioritize the perspectives of [essential workers and the most intensely affected communities](#) in order to successfully and safely reopen the Commonwealth, as they currently experience the [heaviest burden of infection and death](#). While you have stated workplace regulations in general terms, workplace inspections apparently are not planned and employers are left to invent the specifics for their facilities. We emphasize that representatives of the respective employees and of workplace safety organizations must be invited to share their [knowledge of needed protections](#). Similarly, representatives of residential districts who understand the current barriers their neighbors face in protecting themselves and their family members from infection are the only ones who can provide knowledgeable advice on how to remove these barriers.

Point three, an improved balance of medical and public health experts versus the current overwhelming skew towards business representatives on the Reopening Advisory Board, will ensure that available understanding of the pandemic is utilized in real time and that emerging data appropriately inform decision making.

To underscore the harm of excluding the hardest hit communities, many of whom are people of color, from the seats at the table, we would like to remind you: absence of trust in government entities of the undocumented and their family and community members, who comprise a large fraction of the essential workers now exposed and infected with COVID-19, is currently a major obstacle to contact tracing. Policies you have pursued, such as ordering State Police to collaborate with ICE and supporting local police's embrace of immigration enforcement, have deepened the fear which now precludes members of these communities from even picking up the phone on unknown callers.

The course of the COVID-19 epidemic in our state has been disastrous. The death toll among our state's elders and residents of long-term care facilities is an affront to our humanity. In order to

reshape our state's response to enable a successful recovery in the coming weeks and months, we again respectfully request:

1. Expansion of testing and setting of objective benchmarks for testing, opening and reclosing
2. Inclusion of the most intensely affected workers and communities on the Reopening Advisory Board
3. A rebalancing of the Reopening Advisory Board towards medical and public health experts.

We thank you for your consideration of our requests.

Sincerely,

The Massachusetts Coalition for Health Equity