

Talking points on Pennsylvania's Response to COVID-19

COVID-19 and the government response to it continues to be the major issue in the minds of Pennsylvanians. Here are some ideas about how to usefully talk about it.

- **Pennsylvania's response to COVID-19 has been better than most states.** While we were hit hard and early, Pennsylvanians responded by staying home and keeping their distance from others even before Governor Wolf's regulations went into effect. Those regulations further reduced the spread of the virus.
 - **The governor's regulations also helped us avoid a second COVID-19 spike in July and August.** We saw an increase in cases but (1) no rise in deaths and (2) a declining rate of positive test results which meant that our second wave was (1) due more to increased testing rather than new outbreaks of COVID-19 and (2) less concentrated among older, more vulnerable people.
- **There has never been a choice between saving lives and economic growth. There is no trade-off between the two, and it is false to blame Governor Wolf's business closure and stay-at-home orders for the economic decline Pennsylvania has suffered.** The best evidence we have is that the economy would have crashed without those orders as people would have responded to even higher infection rates by staying home and closing their businesses. **Getting the spread of the disease under control has allowed PA's economy to begin recovering.**
- **The current increase in cases is partly the result of the disease spreading again and partly a result of much higher testing capacity.** The state is far better prepared to deal with it than in the spring because of additional capacity for tracking and testing. But it is very worrisome. If it gets worse **we may see some new regulations on business activity but they are likely to be limited and based on both geography and duration.**
- While it did not cause the recent upsurge in cases, **the continued effort on the part of Republicans in Harrisburg to downplay the seriousness of COVID-19 and to discourage people from wearing masks has made a bad situation far worse.**
 - Polls show that people were staying home and closing businesses because of COVID-19 as soon as infection rates spiked and continued to stay home even after the governor's regulations became less stringent.
 - In an effort to employ "herd immunity," the favorite strategy of Trump and the Republicans in PA, Sweden did not order people to stay home or close businesses. It had a mortality rate five times that of nearby Denmark which had stringent rules. And Sweden's economy did worse than Denmark's.
 - **That people stayed home and businesses were closed saved as many as 16,000 lives in Pennsylvania during that time. Some of that is due to people and businesses being cautious. Some of it is due to Governor Wolf's orders.**



- **Governor Wolf's policies have consistently been supported in public opinion polls** and those who are more concerned about saving lives outnumber those more worried about economic costs by about 2-1 (which is not to say that there is a trade-off between them).
- **The notion that people who are older and vulnerable to COVID-19 can protect themselves while everyone else continues a normal life is absurd.** No one in a modern economy can keep themselves entirely safe from a virus spreading wildly through the population.
- **The significant number of deaths in Pennsylvania's nursing homes was NOT a result of Governor Wolf's policies.** While deaths in nursing homes was a higher share of all deaths in PA than in other states, that is not due to bad policy decisions.
 - **Governor's Wolf's order that patients with COVID-19 be admitted to nursing homes followed a March 13, 2020 directive by the CMS (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services).**
 - **The number of nursing home cases per 100,000 nursing home residents was only 3% higher in Pennsylvania than in the rest of the US.**
 - The disease spread in nursing homes not only, and perhaps not primarily, from infected patients but from infected staff. That's why we can't just protect the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions, but must reduce community spread of the coronavirus.
 - Most of the difference in death rates between Pennsylvania and other states was due to Pennsylvania having a higher proportion of elderly residents than other states: 57% more nursing home residents per 100,000 people than the national average and, most likely, a higher percentage of nursing home residents aged 75+. And, because the state was an early victim of the pandemic, we were at a disadvantage due to PPE supplies not yet being available at that time.
 - **None of Governor Wolf's critics have ever explained where elderly and infirm patients discharged from hospitals should have gone** if not nursing homes. Insurance rules forced them to leave hospitals, and families were not equipped to take care of them at home.