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Cuomo: New York Opens Churches, Allows Small Religious Gatherings



NEW YORK — New York will allow religious gatherings of up to 10 people as hospitalization rates continue to decline. More tests and outreach efforts are planned for hard-hit New York City neighborhoods. The Metropolitan Museum of Art could reopen its doors in mid-August.

Coronavirus developments in New York:

RELIGIOUS SERVICES

New York will allow small religious gatherings starting Thursday as the state gradually loosens pandemic restrictions, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said.

Religious gatherings of up to 10 people will be allowed statewide as long as participants wear masks and practice social distancing. The state also is allowing drive-in and parking lot services. Weddings will count as religious ceremonies.

The state will work with an Interfaith Advisory Council to discuss proposals to safely

bring back religious services. The council consists of dozens of religious leaders, including Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts.

“I understand their desire to get to religious ceremonies as soon as possible. As a former altar boy, I get it,” Cuomo said. “But we need to find out how to do it and do it safely and do it smartly. The last thing we want to do is have a religious ceremony that winds up having more people infected.”

The guidelines for small religious gatherings came a day after Cuomo said the state will allow Memorial Day ceremonies with up to 10 people, even though nonessential gatherings have been barred in New York since March.

The New York Civil Liberties Union said both announcements raise constitutional concerns.

“We agree small events where people observe social distancing should be permitted, but that has to apply to all First Amendment events, regardless of message and regardless of whether religious or political,” Christopher Dunn, the group’s legal director, wrote in an email.

NUMBERS

New York recorded 112 new deaths Tuesday, a slight increase from 105 the previous day but still lower than past weeks.

There were 5,570 people hospitalized statewide, continuing a slow decline that began in mid-April. An average of 295 people a day are newly hospitalized for COVID-19.

MORE NEIGHBORHOOD TESTING

Cuomo said targeted testing and outreach will be expanded in low-income New York City neighborhoods that have been hotbeds of the outbreak.

Results from roughly 8,000 antibody tests conducted at New York City church sites indicate what previous data have shown: low-income and non-white neighborhoods in the city have been especially hard hit by the pandemic. For instance, while the positive rate for antibodies citywide is 20%, it was more than twice that in Morrisania in the Bronx, according to preliminary results cited by Cuomo.

“The spread is continuing in those communities and that’s where the new cases are coming from,” Cuomo said.

The expanded testing will include 72 churches and faith-based sites and more sites at public housing developments.

Efforts to stop the spread of the disease will include making more protective gear available and more education.

Cuomo said he is directing all local governments to test low-income communities and to develop outreach programs.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT

Some Columbia University graduates wore everything they needed to celebrate their commencement on Wednesday — caps, gowns, and of course, masks.

The university's commencement ceremony was held virtually, but some students made their way to the Manhattan campus for celebratory photos.

They included engineering senior Sambhav Jain, who sat on Columbia's Alma Mater sculpture with a mask on his face, the flag of his native India next to him and a bottle of champagne in his hand.

MET TO RESET

The Metropolitan Museum of Art plans to reopen to the public in mid-August, museum officials announced.

The Met has been shuttered since March 13 when many of the city's cultural institutions closed because of the coronavirus outbreak.

Met officials said the museum's main Fifth Avenue building will open in mid-August or possibly a few weeks later. There will be no tours, concerts, talks or other events through the end of 2020, and the annual Met Gala will not be held, the officials said.

No reopening has been announced for the Met's other two sites, the Cloisters and the Met Breuer.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

-The Bronx has been hit harder by the coronavirus than any other place in the New York City metropolitan area. And within the Bronx, almost no place has been hit as hard as Co-op City. Data released by city health officials Monday revealed that the virus has killed at least 155 people living in the zip code that covers the complex.

-Starting next week, New York City will be offering free coronavirus test kits to any of the 169 nursing homes in the five boroughs, as well as nurses, aides and other staffers to fill in for quarantined nursing home workers.

-For the first time in two months, customers dined outdoors at restaurants across Connecticut as the state began a lengthy process of easing restrictions meant to combat the spread of the coronavirus.

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