



House of Assembly Communication: COVID-19 Response

The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis

Monday, 27 April 2020

Mr. Speaker:

The House meets today to approve a Resolution extending emergency powers in The Bahamas because of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

I also wish to provide the House and the Bahamian people with an update on a range of matters in my Government's ongoing, full and comprehensive response to the pandemic.

I wish at the outset to offer the condolences of the country and my personal condolences to those who have lost loved ones to this deadly virus.

They remain in our hearts and prayers.

Mr. Speaker:

The Resolution before the House:

“(a.) approves the continuance of the Proclamation made on the 17th day of March, 2020 until the 30th day of May, 2020;

“(b.) affirms the continuance in effect of the Emergency Powers (Covid 19) Regulations, 2020 made on the 17th day of March, 2020 until the 30th day of May, 2020;

“(c.) affirms the continuance in effect of the Emergency Powers (Covid 19) (No. 2) Order, 2020 made on the 23rd day of March, 2020 until the 30th day of May, 2020;

(d) affirms the continuance in effect of the Emergency Powers (Covid 19) (Special Provisions) Order, 2020 made on the 30th

day of March, 2020 until the 30th day of May.”

Mr. Speaker:

I know that some will be disappointed by the extension of the Emergency Orders, including workers and businesses who are hurting.

But I assure them, and I assure all Bahamians and residents, that this short-term sacrifice and pain is absolutely needed:

- to reduce the spread of the virus;

- to protect the health and safety of those we love; and
- to revive our economy as quickly as possible.

Mr. Speaker:

We must always be people of gratitude because therein lies a source of spiritual strength and generosity.

On behalf of the people and the Government, and on my own behalf, we will

never cease nor tire, from expressing our profound gratitude to the health care professionals at every level who battle daily against this virus.

These men and women place themselves at risk day after day to save lives and to heal their fellow citizens and residents.

They are heroes who never expected to be called to such a duty, but who are

nonetheless serving us all in one of our greatest hours of need.

We owe gratitude also to all the men and women in our law enforcement branches, who help to ensure law and order, especially during these challenging times.

I salute all public officers who continue to perform their duties in every government ministry and agency.

I salute also private citizens, and those businesses who have demonstrated generosity of spirit and an unwavering commitment to the common good.

This includes those business enterprises that continue to sustain and to support staff members and workers during this terrible and devastating economic downturn.

I appeal once again to those businesses and citizens with a capacity to do so, to

continue to support their workers and employees.

This is a time for national solidarity!

Mr. Speaker:

As we said at the beginning of the spread of COVID-19 in The Bahamas, among our best measures for fighting this outbreak are measures such as: staying at home, physical distancing, and other vital measures such as curfews and lockdowns.

Contact tracing, and the temporary quarantine and isolation of those exposed to the virus are also vital measures to arrest the spread of the virus and to save and to protect lives.

I join the Minister of Health in recognizing the outstanding and valiant work of the Surveillance officers at the Ministry of Health.

In our fight against COVID-19 we should not only praise our health care professionals and law enforcement officers.

As a sign of our gratitude, we join them in the fight against the virus by staying at home and by wearing our masks and practicing discipline and social distancing.

We must all do our part.

This is a time for solidarity.

I wish to remind Bahamians and residents that the shopping schedule of the last two weeks remains.

The weekday curfews and weekend lockdowns will continue until health officials advise otherwise.

I thank those businesses, employees and all who have complied with the regulations.

Mr. Speaker:

As of 25th April 2020, there are almost 800 individuals in quarantine.

To optimize the intent of the quarantine and isolation period, and to simultaneously enhance the support and monitoring of those in quarantine, the Ministry of Health has undertaken the exploration of a number of solutions that are fit-for-purpose.

It is envisaged that through the simple action of downloading an App, quarantined and isolated individuals could use their

cellphones in a manner similar to a walkie-talkie.

With the touch of a single button they may:

- Connect instantly with care agents;
- Send an emergency assist alert for rapid response; and
- Talk to family and friends in a secured space.

This App will be designed to help individuals in home quarantine and isolation

to stay within the boundaries prescribed by the Surveillance team.

This may further empower these individuals to do their part to protect their mother, father, sister, brother, neighbor and fellow citizens, and reduce the risk of exposure to and spread of COVID-19 within the country.

I underscore that this App will collect anonymous data to ensure that the privacy of those using the App is respected.

Health officials have repeatedly noted that a number of those who should remain in quarantine or isolation at home are not doing so, which could result in greater spread of the virus.

I note that the Emergency Orders have been amended to enforce strict fines for those who break quarantine protocols.

Those who break quarantine will be fined up to \$20,000 or five years imprisonment or both.

Mr. Speaker:

We know from other jurisdictions how rapidly COVID-19 spread in other countries or locales because individuals who were COVID-19 positive returned to their home countries without being quarantined.

We cannot risk doing this in The Bahamas because this could lead to a wider outbreak of the virus.

I know that this has placed a burden on some Bahamians overseas.

I understand the frustration and worry of their families here at home.

We are working to try to resolve this matter in the best interest of all concerned and the best interest of the country.

In keeping with the protocols of other countries, the Government is finalizing plans

to secure a mandatory quarantine facility to accommodate the return of a number of Bahamians in the United States to New Providence.

At present there are 200 Bahamians who want to return home.

Mr. Speaker:

To emphasize the need to reduce community spread of this deadly virus I wish to share with the House the Assessment by health officials of the Analysis of confirmed COVID-19 cases by Dr. Danny Davis, an

Associate Professor at the University of the Bahamas.

The Government's COVID-19 Coordinator Dr. Dahl-Regis provided notes regarding the impact of the restrictive measures put in place to mitigate the spread of Coronavirus 19 throughout the islands of The Bahamas.

She noted:

“The Ministry of Health tested all symptomatic and suspect cases for Covid-

19 as recommended by the World Health Organization.

“During the period prior to the curfew restrictions, the country recorded increased number of cases every other day and then daily.

“Following the first lockdown period, there was a decrease in new cases. Accordingly to the exponential curve, at least 23 cases were averted with the imposition of the restrictive measures. Additionally, lives were saved.”

Dr. Dahl-Regis forwarded the Report from Dr. Davis, noting that:

“Models were developed with his support and a team from PAHO, the Ministry of Health and other international statisticians and mathematicians.”

Dr. Davis’s Report notes:

“Building on the assertion that the difference between the predicted curve and the actual value is attributed to social distancing measures, it follows that social

distancing resulted in an estimated reduction to 23 new cases by Day 27 (April 9, 2020).

“This is a 36% reduction in the number of new COVID-19 cases.

“The aforementioned estimated reduction of 23 new cases translates into an estimated reduction of four deaths over this past week. This death reduction estimate is based on the country’s fatality record of 8 deaths per 41 confirmed cases.

“Without the social distancing measures, we estimate the country would have recorded 12 deaths by Day 27.

“These unrealized deaths represent a 33% reduction in the number of estimated COVID-19 related deaths by Day 27.”

“Further, the reduction of 23 cases, indicates a reduction in the case load for the doctors and hospital resources, and demand for beds.”

Mr. Speaker:

My Government will do all that we can to protect the vulnerable in our society.

This is a time for national solidarity.

As previously announced, the Government is appointing a National Food Committee, which will consult widely with many stakeholders in numerous fields.

The major objective of the National Food Committee is to steer the coordination and collaboration of the public sector, private

sector and NGOs to increase food distribution nationally and fairly.

This includes, in the immediate term, distribution of food for vulnerable individuals and communities.

We must ensure that the poor and those struggling through the current economic downturn because of the pandemic have sufficient nutritious food.

We must also ensure that those affected by Hurricane Dorian also continue to have food.

I wish to emphasize that many more Bahamians are vulnerable to food insecurity as a result of COVID-19.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- the newly unemployed;
- self-employed individuals whose businesses are adversely affected;
- senior citizens unable to leave their homes because of the virus;
- school children who do not have sufficient food;

- some patients and those who provide them with care at home;

Mr. Speaker:

The National Food Committee will coordinate with various food sector agencies and groups for the distribution of food to the vulnerable.

These agencies and groups include, but are not limited to: the Ministry and Department of Social Services, the Ministry

of Health, the Ministry of Education, the National Emergency Management Agency, the Disaster Recovery Authority, domestic and international NGOs, civil society groups, philanthropic organizations, and private citizens and businesses.

The National Food Committee will help to determine the need for engagement of food workers, both formally and informally, to help with the preparation and distribution of food.

The Committee will make recommendations on the delivery of food for vulnerable individuals.

This will be done in consultation with the Ministry of Health and the Head of the COVID-19 Health Taskforce.

Mr. Speaker:

The Committee will communicate with wholesalers and retailers to confirm the status of food supply chains to the country,

and make recommendations on how to keep these supply chains viable.

The Committee will put together a digital food distribution plan to make sure that every Bahamian in need is provided with food.

Let me add that the Government will promote and strengthen industries in pork, poultry and beef, and is committed to protecting local industries.

Further, the Food Committee will also make recommendations on the

enhancement of delivery services and the kinds of digital platforms required to boost home delivery.

Mr. Speaker:

I am pleased that Mrs. Susan Holowesko Larson, M.B.E., has agreed to serve as Coordinator of the Committee. Mrs. Holowesko Larson has an impressive record of public service.

She is a Co-Founder of Ride for Hope Bahamas and the Bahamas Hope

Foundation, which raises hope and resources for Bahamians fighting cancer.

She is also a Co-Founder of Bahamas Strong, which was established last year in response to the unprecedented destruction caused by Hurricane Dorian.

She helped to spearhead the country's private sector response to Dorian as well as the initial coordination of the international NGO community.

With her longstanding business experience and commitment to public

service, I am pleased that she has agreed to serve in this new capacity.

The members and stakeholders represented on the Committee will soon be announced.

Mr. Speaker:

Last week, I advised that the Government would implement a program to assist individuals who have rental obligations but whose income has been

impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, I wish to announce the details of this program and how it is to be administered.

This program is limited to residential rentals.

It is only for those whose employment or income has been affected by COVID-19.

Individuals will have to provide documentation to their landlord to qualify for this program.

Those who qualify for this program will be able to defer – or in other words to postpone – a portion of their rent payment for the next three months.

Landlords will be required to defer 40 percent of rent due per month for this three-

month period, beginning with the month of April, 2020.

Landlords will not for the three-month period be able to evict tenants who were in good standing prior to April.

Landlords will not be able to disconnect the electricity or water for tenants who were in good standing prior to April.

This means for example, that if an individual's rent is \$800 per month, they will be required to pay \$480 per month over the next three months. The remainder will be deferred or postponed.

At the end of the three-month period, individuals will have 12 months to pay back the deferred amount.

This means that individuals will have to pay the unpaid rent back to the landlord, but will have a full calendar year to do so.

I note again, that landlords will not be able to evict any tenant who was in good standing as of March of this year.

That means that there should be no evictions between now and the end of June unless the tenant had been already legally eligible for eviction before April.

I want to be very clear:

This is not permission for individuals not to pay their rent.

I advise those who are still able to pay their full rent to do so.

Mr. Speaker:

It is important to recognize also that landlords depend on rental payments for their own income and often, to pay off their bank mortgages on the rental properties.

This is why those rental payments can be deferred but they cannot be eliminated.

I am pleased to advise that the commercial banks have indicated they are open to deferring the mortgage payments on rental properties to the extent that landlords are affected by this program.

To qualify for this program, a renter must meet the following criteria:

- They must be renting residential property inside The Bahamas;
- They must be paying a monthly rent of \$2,000 per month or less;
- They must be no more than one month in arrears with rent;
- They must be a Bahamian citizen or legal resident;
- They must be able to demonstrate that their employment or income stream has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Renters will have to provide the evidence necessary to show that their income has been impacted by COVID-19 and they will have to sign an agreement to repay the amount deferred.

This will be mandatory for all landlords for their qualifying renters.

In due course, I will present the revised order to give effect to this program.

Mr. Speaker:

It is my hope that renters and landlords can work together through this unprecedented time to implement this program with full cooperation by both sides.

Landlords may with the agreement of the renter decide to provide a bigger deferment amount.

Qualifying renters can decide that they want a smaller deferment, or no deferment at all.

I am asking landlords and renters to approach this with understanding and with patience.

Many renters are on unemployment assistance and will not have the means to pay full rent.

Many landlords have mortgage obligations to meet with the banks for these rental properties.

They and other landlords also depend on rental income to take care of themselves and their families.

The government's policy is intended to recognize that all parties – including the banks which hold mortgages – have a stake in this matter.

I am asking for a sense of national solidarity, personal and collective responsibility and goodwill by all.

Neither renters nor landlords should seek to take any advantages at this time.

The details of the program will be communicated in the coming days.

Mr. Speaker:

Our primary focus right now are:

- dealing with the health challenges because of COVID-19;
- food distribution for the most vulnerable;
- social and economic assistance; and
- the maintenance of law and order.

But, we are also planning and preparing for the way forward and the very next steps so that we can begin to reopen our economy and our society more broadly.

Let me emphasize that those who may have criminal intent in their mind, will be dealt with swiftly and vigorously.

We will maintain law and order and we are monitoring gangs and others who are known to the Police for criminal behavior.

Mr. Speaker:

The House will recall that I formed a broad-based National COVID-19 Coordinating Committee, comprised of a broad range of stakeholders.

They have been meeting regularly and they have been providing advice and recommendations on a full range of matters related to the pandemic.

They have been working with medical professionals and other experts in their respective areas to develop the draft plans

for what comes next, especially to gradually re-open the economy in phases.

Mr. Speaker:

The reality is that COVID-19 will be with us for the foreseeable future even as our number of cases – and those around the world – begin to stabilize and even decline.

For the immediate term at least, we will need protocols and a strategy that will allow us to re-open our society and our economy

in a way that protects the health and well-being of Bahamians and residents.

The Coordinating Committee has recommended protocols and a strategy that we will announce in due course.

We must establish and adhere to a way of doing things that will allow us to open back up in a responsible manner.

Such re-opening will be gradual and deliberate.

At each step, proper health and physical distancing protocols will be mandatory and will be enforced.

Even as we look and plan to open back up – we will not and cannot establish a fixed timetable that says we will do this particular thing on one date and another on another date.

While the Government establishes plans, the general timing of the phased reopening recommended by the Coordination Committee, will be predicated upon metrics and guidelines by health officials.

[Refer to printed graphic]

As in other jurisdictions, we must also have the flexibility to make changes quickly and to tighten restrictions if the numbers do not move in the right direction.

Mr. Speaker:

Our airport and seaport partners – as well as the hospitality industry – are themselves working with their counterparts around the world to develop international and regional standards for the transportation and lodging of individuals in the COVID-19 landscape.

We will review these standards and accept those that we feel are appropriate for The Bahamas.

We will also as necessary implement our own specific standards where we feel various regional or international standards do not match our reality.

We have started to reopen small parts of the economy to allow Bahamians and residents to access hardware and auto-parts, among other items.

Any further reopening will be guided by the advice of our health professionals.

Mr. Speaker:

Yesterday, the Cabinet Office announced the Economic Recovery Committee.

The National Coordinating Committee is a committee representing various national stakeholders to advise the government generally.

The Economic Recovery Committee is a group convened to draft a medium- and long-term strategic vision for recovery along with proposed implementation plans.

The Co-Chairs of the Committee are Acting Financial Secretary Mr. Marlon Johnson and businessman Mr. Ken Kerr, CEO, Providence Advisors.

The Economic Recovery group is made up of individuals with noted expertise and

experience from the private and public sector.

This group will consult widely, at home and abroad, with representation from myriad industries.

This public-private Committee will make recommendations to the Cabinet on: the long-term economic recovery of The Bahamas economy, including job-creation and stimulating small business recovery and development in response to COVID-19.

The Committee will focus on restoring the macroeconomy; restarting a competitive business environment; economic diversification; tourism and transport; financial services and labour.

Public-Private partnerships will be essential in restoring and rebuilding our economy.

I have charged the Economic Committee with thinking boldly and creatively in its deliberations.

We are in a new era, so we must think in new ways and think outside of the narrow confines of what is necessary or possible.

Mr. Speaker:

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the worst economic crisis for our country in living memory.

Due to international borders being closed, our tourism sector has shut down. Tourism is the heart of our economy.

The virus and its effects make it difficult to predict when tourists will return.

We have the most dynamic tourism economy in the region.

We will do all we can to be ready to receive and host visitors when they can travel again.

However, in the interim while travel has stopped we must explore what else we can do to make it through in these difficult times.

The purpose of this economic advisory group is to give practical, innovative and doable policy recommendations for the way forward.

We need the minds and hearts of this committee to contribute ideas that Cabinet and the Parliament can consider to boost our economic circumstance.

This is not the time to be timid.

What are needed are ideas that can generate economic activity and trade, and a pathway to those ideas that is doable.

This Committee must think quickly, as we are in the crisis now.

Ideas from all existing sectors should be reviewed.

Ideas in sectors we are not yet in must also be pursued.

We must use our individual and collective Bahamian imagination for greater self-reliance.

We will continue to promote and to encourage the manufacturing of local products.

The new face mask industry is doing well, and by some estimates may be valued between six to nine million dollars a year.

Mr. Speaker:

I thank Bahamians and residents for their suggestions and ideas.

As of Sunday, April, 26, we have received more than 1,700 suggestions that have been submitted ideas through the opm.gov.bs Suggestions platform.

We are in the process of sorting these suggestions, which have poured in from New Providence, Grand Bahama and the Family Islands.

The suggestions cover topics ranging from ideas on how to diversify our economy, how to address critical issues like food security, how best to re-open our economy, how to improve government services, and many, many more.

We may not be able to reply to every suggestion, but we will carefully read every submission and ensure that it reaches the right agency for consideration.

I encourage Bahamians and residents to continue to send in suggestions.

We welcome the ideas.

I thank the Bahamian people and residents for the solidarity they are demonstrating at this time.

Mr. Speaker:

Most Bahamians are playing their part in the fight against this virus.

Many are staying at home and following the guidelines and Emergency Orders.

Many students are learning at home while their parents are working from home. Some Bahamians are discovering new talents and hobbies.

Bahamians and residents are wearing their masks and practicing physical distancing.

There are countless acts of love and kindness and generosity.

We must all continue to play our part to stem this outbreak and to return, over time, to a greater sense of normalcy.

Please continue to stay at home.

Go out only when absolutely necessary.

Go out by yourself, not as a group.

As another world leader said:
“Remember: it is not just about adhering to the letter of the law.

“The spirit of the guidelines is to reduce movement to a minimum, and to avoid being out and about in the community. This is the way to protect yourself, your family and everyone else.”

Mr. Speaker:

In all things and at all times let us pray unceasingly to the God who gives us life and who is able to give new life and life abundantly.

I wish to close with the words of a well-known hymn, which may be our shared prayer and hope.

To the God of New Beginnings we pray:

“Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;

“The darkness deepens; Lord, with me
abide;

When other helpers fail and comforts flee,

Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

“Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;

Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass

away;

Change and decay in all around I see—

O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

“I need Thy presence every passing hour;

What but Thy grace can foil the tempter’s

pow’r?

Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can

be?

Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide

with me.

“I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;

Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;

Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy
victory?

I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

“Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing
eyes;

Shine through the gloom and point me to
the skies;

Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain
shadows flee;

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.”

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

May God bless and guide our Bahamas.

