

April 14th 2020

Dear Governor Pritzker,

As frontline health care professionals, we applaud your rapid and robust response to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. We commend your efforts to “flatten the curve” in Illinois by issuing a prompt state-wide shelter-in-place order, closing schools and non-essential businesses, promoting masking, and supporting social distancing by signing telehealth legislation. Social distancing has significantly altered Illinois projections of COVID-19 hospitalizations, resource use, and the possible collapse of our medical system. As a result of your decisive leadership, Illinois is a trailblazer and a public health model for the rest of the country.

We also appreciate your continued efforts to optimally protect health care professionals by expanding telemedicine, extending civil immunity during the pandemic, obtaining/distributing personal protective equipment (PPE), and expanding hospital capacity. This letter represents our individual professional opinions regarding the necessary next steps to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and reopen society.

Illinois will likely reach peak hospital resource use in the next two to three weeks. As the dust settles and the end of this public health crisis seems in sight, many will be tempted to call for the reopening of schools and non-essential businesses as unemployment and economic hardship mount. But, **reopening society depends on knowing who is, has been, or has not been infected.** Until a safe and effective vaccine exists or testing and evidence of protection by natural immunity is readily available, we cannot return to normal activities. Without these capabilities, rolling back shelter-in-place, lifting school and non-essential business closures, and relaxing social distancing will likely lead to a devastating second surge of COVID-19 cases with the same risk of killing citizens, overwhelming our healthcare system, eroding public trust, and further devastating our economy. Without evidence of protective immunity to SARS-CoV-2, this will continue to infect our communities. Reopening society until then depends on knowing who is infected and then engaging in effective isolation of those individuals. Ultimately, a full return to normal requires an effective and safe vaccine to reduce the number of susceptible individuals and contain the spread of the virus or scientific evidence supporting adequate immunity.

Key actions must be taken before reopening society to ensure that a second surge of COVID-19 cases does not occur:

Surveillance Testing: We applaud the state’s efforts and successes in ramping up SARS-CoV-2 testing in Illinois. Your efforts have made it possible to expand testing to health care workers and first responders. But as you have acknowledged, testing is still limited. Indeed, in the past few weeks, we have learned that asymptomatic and early stages persons can transmit, so while testing of all symptomatic patients is necessary, it will not be sufficient to prevent spread, once schools, businesses, and public gatherings resume. We are calling for strategic surveillance testing of the population combined with robust quarantine of anyone who tests positive, even asymptomatic or with mild disease.

Contact Tracing and Monitoring: To prevent further transmission, we need systematic and comprehensive tracing and testing of all contacts of any individual who tests positive SARS-CoV-19. Additionally, those who test positive must be robustly quarantined. Our current tracing, testing, and isolating model for tuberculosis should be adapted, improved, and scaled for SARS-CoV-19.

However, implementation of both contact tracing and surveillance testing will require expanding our public health workforce significantly, which could directly create jobs for the citizens of Illinois while working to safely reopen society. We encourage you and your team to adapt the community health worker (CHW) model, in use in Boston. Tracking can be conducted through novel mobile phone apps or existing remote patient monitoring platforms.

Vaccine Research and Development: Because we cannot eliminate COVID-19 from our communities, mass vaccination is, ultimately, the only solution. Until we have widespread vaccination, and, therefore, immunity from the virus, we risk repeat cycles and surges of COVID-19, episodic social distancing, and continued economic depression.

We call for you to take action now as the weather starts to improve and the economic depression sets in for many. We are within weeks of the peak of the surge, and these measures will be necessary prior to reopening schools, businesses, and public places. The short term benefits of hastily rolling back social distancing pale in comparison to the grave cycle of death and economic burden that await us without surveillance testing, contact tracing and robust quarantine, and, eventually, widespread vaccination.

Frontline health care workers in Illinois thank you for your consideration and outstanding leadership.

Best
Regards,

Laura J. Zimmermann, MD, MS, FACP Director of Clinical Preventive Medicine,
Rush University Medical Group Assistant Professor of Preventive and Internal
Medicine, Rush University, Chicago

Eve Bloomgarden, MD Assistant Professor of
Medicine (Endocrinology) Northwestern University -
Feinberg School of Medicine

Amisha Wallia, MD, MS Assistant Professor of
Medicine (Endocrinology) Northwestern University -
Feinberg School of Medicine

Shikha Jain, MD, FACP Assistant Professor, Department of Internal Medicine, Division of
Hematology, Oncology and Cell Therapy, Rush Medical College Physician Director of Media
Relations, Rush University Cancer Center

Vineet Arora, MD, MAPP, FACP, MHM Herbert T. Abelson Professor of Medicine Associate Chief
Medical Officer for the Clinical Learning Environment, University of Chicago Medicine

Ali Khan, MD, MPP, FACP SVP + Executive Medical Director, Oak
Street Health Clinical Faculty, University of Chicago - Pritzker

School of Medicine

Jane Holl, MD, MPH Professor of Neurology and Center for
Healthcare Delivery Science and Innovation
Biological Sciences Division, University of Chicago

****ADDITIONAL SIGNATURES WERE REMOVED FOR PRIVACY PURPOSES****