



**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT
TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
BY THE HONOURABLE KIM N. WILSON, JP, MP
MINISTER OF HEALTH
UPDATE ON COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDANCE
4 December 2020**

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members,

As the world's efforts to eradicate the coronavirus focus increasingly on the manufacture and distribution of approved vaccines, all of us in Bermuda need to centre our immediate efforts on containing the pandemic on our shores.

After a summer and fall of relatively few but expected new cases of COVID-19 – I say 'expected' because as commercial flights resumed on 1 July, this presented opportunities for importation of the virus, as such, we are now experiencing a distinct increase in positive cases on the island. This is also expected because of the level of community transmission within countries where the majority of our travelers are coming from.

Mr Speaker, to provide context, and as the Premier indicated recently, the Government made a deliberate decision to welcome the re-start of regularly scheduled commercial flights.

Visitors to the island support hotels, restaurants, bars and taxis. They participate in a variety of experiences and visit the diverse attractions the island has to offer. They rent minicars and mopeds and, in general, provide an invaluable boost to our local economy. In short, visitors support jobs.

Recognizing that it is travellers – both visitors and residents – who, despite their best intentions are likely to import the coronavirus, the Ministry of Health has developed a number of public health protocols to combat and minimize the possibility of infectious spread. These protocols for travellers blend with the protocols put in place as the Government lifted restrictions for residents in the late spring and early summer.

Mr Speaker, as of yesterday's date, Bermuda had 272 confirmed cases of COVID-19. We now have 278, including two hospitalizations. Although it may seem as if we are currently hitting a new peak, we must be reminded that in the month of April there were 82 cases confirmed. This compares with a total of 62 cases in November.

Mr Speaker, there is no doubt the island is feeling the effects of the pandemic surge occurring elsewhere in the world. Our gateway cities are all suffering an increase in confirmed cases, hospitalisations and, sadly, death. In turn, Bermuda is living through its own disruptive rise in positive cases.

To safeguard the economic progress made – despite enormous and ongoing challenges – the Ministry has reviewed the public health protocols in place to determine what must be done to, once again, 'flatten the curve'.

Mr Speaker, while our knowledge of the coronavirus – its investigation, care and treatment – is much improved compared with the spring, there is one fact which will challenge our ability to cope as we go through the winter, and that one fact is that: -

- there is increasing evidence that the virus spreads through airborne transmission of small droplets and particles, which are suspended in the air over longer distances and for more time than the initial large droplet transmission first associated with COVID-19.

Combined with the most likely transmission happening through close contact with an infected person for a period of 15 minutes or more, it is clear that being indoors due to colder temperatures, where the air circulates less and or more slowly, increases the risk of infection and spread of COVID-19.

Indeed, **Mr Speaker**, the Ministry's contact tracing investigations strongly suggest that it is social mixing or gatherings of people that are most likely to produce local transmission and positive cases.

As such, the public health protocols developed, and now under review, aim to assist the community on how best to navigate the risks involved. This is a matter of personal responsibility for community benefit, as the Government strives to strike a balance between risk mitigation and the economic impact of taking precautions.

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members will be aware that one of the most important steps an individual can take to ‘stop the spread’ is to simply wear a mask.

As recently announced, the Government has moved to introduce fines for persons not wearing a mask in accordance with the existing law. While there is guidance on mask-wearing at coronavirus.gov.bm, please know that if a physical distance of 6 feet cannot be maintained between you and other people, you must wear a mask. This does not apply if you are at home, with members of your household, eating or drinking or doing high exertion exercise. Also, this does not apply to children under the age of two.

However, to be clear, this mask requirement does include:

- workers at all workplace premises;
- people using public transport or taxis;
- any person visiting any establishment, whether indoor or outdoor (for example, a grocery store, shop, bank, office, etc.), unless otherwise allowed by specific guidance such as that which applies to bars, restaurants and gyms; and,
- in public places (streets or parks) when other persons are present and 6 feet distance cannot be maintained.

Mr Speaker, in addition to highlighting the need to be more rigorous with respect to mask-wearing during this stage of the pandemic, the Ministry is reviewing the guidance provided to travellers arriving in Bermuda.

As I stated at the beginning, air travel is the main way in which the coronavirus reaches our island. It is a situation that is particularly difficult to handle when a person is asymptomatic but infectious – and they don't know it!

As the incubation period for COVID-19 is between two and 14 days, the Ministry developed 'mobile quarantine' as a means by which newly arriving travellers could be 'free to roam' if they had both a negative pre-arrival test and a negative test on arrival at the airport. The *"Ten Tips for Mobile Quarantine During COVID-19"* states, for example, that travellers cannot attend events with large groups of people, they must stay away from crowded places and they need to exercise outside and not in a gym or with a sports team. As part of mobile quarantine, all travellers are required to be tested on Day 4, Day 8 and Day 14 of their stay. If a traveller does not have a negative pre-arrival test, that person has to quarantine until a Day 8 negative test result.

Mr Speaker, there has been considerable confusion regarding the mobile quarantine procedures. There is uncertainty in the community in terms of what is, and is not, allowed.

In revisiting the public health rationale that forms its foundation, the Ministry of Health is taking into account new facts which have come to light since mobile quarantine was put in place.

For the most part, it is the surging pandemic around the world – not just in our gateway cities – that has led to an increase in confirmed positive cases of COVID-19 in Bermuda. The Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit (ESU) has noted that an increasing number of travellers are testing positive on Day 4 and, to a lesser extent, Day 8 of their stay. Some are symptomatic but others are not. ESU has also noted that an increasing share of the confirmed cases in Bermuda is due to local transmission.

In an effort to minimize the potential to spread COVID-19, the Ministry has developed a new ‘traveller continuum’ that provides more clear direction to visiting and resident travellers during the first 14 days of their stay in, or return to, Bermuda. This takes into consideration the testing data compiled by ESU, as well as the information gleaned from ESU’s contact tracing investigations.

The protocols captured in *“The Traveller’s First 14 Days”* seek to balance the need to manage the risk of transmission with the requirement to bolster our very fragile economic recovery.

Mr Speaker, for those who have a negative pre-arrival test as well as a negative 'on arrival' test at the airport, the new guidance clearly states those persons can take public transport, dine outdoors or dine indoors only at the hotel where they are staying, go shopping, enjoy outdoor activities and work remotely from home. They cannot go to work and attend in-person meetings, participate in church services, dine indoors at restaurants not located in their hotel, go to a gym, attend a permitted large event or other events such as a house party, birthday party or funeral, or attend indoor events, generally. When those travellers have had a negative Day 4 test result, they can dine indoors, attend permitted outdoor large events, but still cannot go to a gym or play a contact sport.

For those travellers without a pre-arrival test, they are tested on arrival at the airport and must remain in quarantine until receiving a negative Day 8 test result.

After a negative Day 8 test result, all travellers can go to work and attend meetings, go to school and day care, enjoy the movies and attend church services.

A negative Day 14 test result is required before any travellers can use a gym or play a contact sport.

For travellers, the testing regime of 'on arrival' and then additional testing through to Day 14 continues to apply.

It is hoped the clarity now provided around what activities a traveller can engage in during the first 14 days of a stay on island is helpful.

The new guidance, "*The Traveller's First 14 Days*", will be available online at coronavirus.gov.bm later today.

Mr Speaker, to assist in the identification of travellers, the Government proposes to implement a 'traveller wristband' to be worn by all those arriving on island until they test out on Day 14 with a negative test result.

The Government is aware that not knowing who has travelled recently is causing some anxiety in the community. This can be allayed, to a certain extent, by requiring all travellers to wear the wristband. As each test day comes due, the testing team will check to ensure the traveller wristband has not been removed.

This provides an easy way for businesses, for example, to know that it is a recent traveller who is patronising their establishment.

Mr Speaker, a final change to our activities which the Government will put in place is a reinstatement of earlier closing for bars and nightclubs, from 2.00am back to midnight.

As stated previously, social mixing is being identified, through contact tracing investigations, as a means by which COVID-19 transmission occurs. The purpose in reducing the hours of operation is to reduce the opportunity to engage in social mixing in a setting that can lead to a less robust adherence to public health protocols.

Mr Speaker, this Government recognizes that this is a difficult pill to swallow at this festive time of year. However, we will continue to work with our stakeholders, and will re-evaluate all of these more restrictive public health protocols early in the New Year.

Mr Speaker, in closing, I would like to say this Government is very aware of just how difficult it is to effect an economic recovery whilst still in the midst of a global pandemic. It forces us to put precautionary measures in place that impact us personally in our daily lives. More particularly, we know these measures can be extremely challenging for businesses.

I am reminded, though, **Mr Speaker**, that at the beginning of this marathon, our main measure of success was that we would not overwhelm our hospital system. At this point, I will say that we have succeeded in this regard. Residents, frontline workers, Ministry staff, the third sector, local businesses, international business – all of us – we have worked hard and worked together in this fight against COVID-19.

The marathon is not over yet, so our continued commitment to robust public health protocols is critical.

I want to thank the entire Bermuda community for its unceasing efforts.

Thank you, **Mr Speaker**.