

The Holidays are approaching and we're all looking forward to spending time with our loved ones as we make plans for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Our local healthcare leaders have reported in recent days that our parish is currently experiencing another "wave" of the Coronavirus pandemic, with a significant surge in the number of reported cases. This rise in cases highlights an increased risk of infection in the coming weeks.

I am strongly urging all of our people to show good judgment and use common sense as we plan our holiday festivities. Please take precautions and be aware of the risks of infection. This is particularly critical for our family members who are elderly, or suffering from underlying health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, or heart disease.

The Coronavirus is still highly dangerous to our most vulnerable loved ones, which is something to seriously consider at holiday time. We need to understand that our young people, who are socially active, are at higher risk for infection, with the potential to expose family members who are most vulnerable and at highest risk of the most devastating impacts of the virus – including death.

We've seen this tragedy happen here, and it's deeply painful for the families involved. We don't want joyous Thanksgiving celebrations, to result in family tragedies at Christmas time.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, one of our biggest challenges has been the strains on our healthcare facilities and professionals from a heavy case load. If these facilities are overwhelmed, and healthcare personnel are infected, it is possible we could see drastic spikes in mortality like those experienced elsewhere in the world. We don't want that to happen here.

We are deeply fortunate to be a regional healthcare hub, with highly regarded healthcare facilities and professionals. Over the last 9 months, our healthcare providers have been forced to pioneer new protocols and behaviors to address the unique difficulties posed by the virus. They've innovated new therapies, new room, ward and facility configurations, and a range of ways to optimize their capacity and capabilities to fight the virus.

I am deeply grateful for the work of Ochsner / Lafayette General, Lourdes, LHC Group and all of our healthcare stakeholders who have worked so hard to respond to this public health emergency.

I'm also proud and grateful for the work of our medical task force, under the leadership of Dr. Tina Stefanski, who have tirelessly provided

guidance on how we can balance our public health needs with our resulting economic challenges that also have public health consequences.

There are many encouraging developments in our efforts to combat COVID-19. The mortality rate has declined, new protocols and therapies are proving to be substantially effective. The availability of testing, PPE and masks has increased dramatically. Led by the private sector, we are hearing about vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna and Astra Zeneca, all reporting greater than 90% effectiveness, with potential for widespread availability in the coming weeks and months. Soon you will have the opportunity to check with your doctor and make the choice you feel is best for you and your family.

With the efforts of our healthcare professionals, improved therapies, and the promise of vaccines, we are on the verge of reducing COVID-19 to a public health threat much closer in morbidity and mortality to the flu, than to how it has ravaged our communities in its early stages.

For now, it's important we continue to be vigilant and diligent in how we respond to the virus, particularly with respect to our vulnerable populations. Since the beginning, we've discussed the importance of proper hygiene, social distancing, and wearing masks indoors when social distancing isn't possible. These measures are just as important today as they were back in March.

We have a second public health emergency that is the result of shutdowns that have been implemented. The resulting isolation, restrictions and financial pressures are putting additional vulnerable populations at risk. Across the nation, we are seeing dramatic increases in alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, and suicide.

This is the very real, profoundly serious downside of lockdowns that close our economy and isolate us from each other. We simply can't afford to go back there.

Our nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been highly controversial. It became intertwined with the politics of the presidential election, with views divided substantially along partisan lines. While this is understandable, it is unfortunate.

There is one group of people shouting to shut everything down, no matter what. There is another group of people shouting to open everything up, no matter what. The other 90% of us are caught in the middle. We have seen changing and conflicting information on a host of issues from national and international public health institutions. Combined with

media sensationalism and social media wars, thoughtful, concerned people are having a hard time knowing who or what to believe when it comes to protecting their own health.

Likewise, elected officials are challenged in determining how best to balance public health with social and economic concerns. Now that the election is over, now is the time to stop shouting at each other. We must pursue the right balance to keep our community both safe, and prosperous.

Here in Louisiana, the authority to determine the government response lies primarily with the governor. After a challenge from the legislature, this authority has been upheld in state courts. Our difficulty locally, is how best to handle requirements that are established at the state level, with enforcement authority vested in state agencies.

As we have learned, the State Fire Marshal, ATC and the Louisiana Department of Health are the agencies responsible for enforcing the governor's current mandates. Our police and fire departments work with these agencies, under their guidance to respond to potential violations of these mandates. It's not an ideal situation, but our people are doing the best they can.

In the more than 70 press conferences we have held on the pandemic, I have repeatedly stated that the voluntary actions of our people are far more powerful than any possible government mandate. No government has the resources to watch all of our people all of the time. And we wouldn't want them to. This is a free country. Our path to preserving our freedoms is to make sure we don't give government reasons to expand the scope of their power over us.

Our thoughtful, responsible response to this pandemic is the best way to preserve our freedoms and way of living. It's also the best way to protect our loved ones – our friends, families, and co-workers – from the ravages of this virus.

My Administration has taken this public health emergency seriously since the very beginning. We were the first to close Senior Centers in March. We established the first mobile testing site in the state, at the Cajundome. We created a medical task force to get advice from experts and coordinate the response of our healthcare institutions. We have sourced and acquired masks and personal protective equipment for our healthcare professionals, our businesses, and our people. We have repeatedly communicated with our citizens and the media about best practices in responding to this pandemic. We have worked to reopen our businesses safely. My staff has worked throughout the pandemic, even

when all LCG facilities were closed, at significant personal risk, to keep our parish safer.

Please use good judgement and common sense this holiday season. Smaller gatherings are better than larger gatherings. Outdoor gatherings are generally safer than indoor gatherings. Younger people who are socially active pose potential dangers to older, high risk people. As always, please practice good hygiene, social distance, and wear masks indoors when social distancing isn't possible. This holiday season, relatively *minor* inconveniences can prevent *major* tragedies in our families.

This has been a long journey for all of us. After 9 months, I think we are all tired and want it to be over. We are getting closer, but we still have a way to go on our journey. With a little more diligence, a little more vigilance, we can get where we need to be.

If you're confused about what is the best way to stay safe and keep your family safe, please consult your Doctor or health professionals. They know the most about you and your situation. Our local healthcare institutions are actively communicating about the status of the virus in our community and best practices for limiting the spread. You will get better information about what's appropriate for you and your family than relying on Facebook, Twitter, or Cable News.

I am grateful to everyone who has worked so hard over the last 9 months to fight this public health emergency. Thanks to the LCG employees who worked through the shutdown. Thanks to all of our healthcare professionals.

Thanks to the members of the Louisiana National Guard who have pitched in. Thanks to the community organizations who have responded to the needs of our people. Thanks to everyone who has treated others with respect, compassion and understanding, rather than spewing venom and casting blame. I am honored and humbled to serve as your Mayor-President.

We don't know what the future holds. We do know, that if we respect each other and work together, we will find a way through this darkness into the light.

I look forward to a Happy Thanksgiving, Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year, for us all. Thank you, and God Bless You.