

HOW GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS CAN ASSIST IDAHOANS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

POLICY BRIEF | MARCH 24, 2020

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many local elected officials across Idaho have been vested with emergency powers. With these emergency powers, local officials can take actions to help taxpayers, businesses, and employees during these unforeseen times — actions that uplift individuals and businesses through this crisis, instead of holding them back.

They can also take action now to help prepare for some of the economic consequences of this virus in the future.

PUBLIC OFFICIALS SHOULD CONSIDER DOING THE FOLLOWING:

- ▶ **Institute a hiring freeze.** [Tulsa, Oklahoma instituted a hiring freeze](#) to prepare for coming budget shortfalls as the economic impact of COVID-19 remains unknown.
- ▶ **Cut back on non-essential services and non-essential staff.** When city parks are closed, when parking operations are not being enforced, and airport travel is limited, local governments do not need the usual amount of staffing for those services, making them easy targets for spending reductions.
- ▶ **Preemptively impose other spending cuts.** Now is the time for government officials to look ahead and prepare for a severe downturn in tax revenue. It is imperative to make cuts today so that tax increases are avoided in the future.
- ▶ **Halt all parking meter enforcement.** The city of Boise recently shut down parking meters in front of restaurants to make space for take-out and delivery drivers. However, the best practice would be: Shutdown all government parking meters, so people who still need to be out and about can park as close as possible to their destination to minimize potential exposure. A similar action has been [taken in St. Louis, Missouri](#).
- ▶ **Support take-out and delivery by suspending interfering regulations.** For instance, [the state of Colorado suspended laws that banned alcohol](#) from being taken off the premises of restaurants and bars. Taking similar action in Idaho is one of the only ways to keep restaurants and bars afloat.

- ▶ **Suspend or postpone local occupational and business license renewal mandates.** It is not going to be on the priority list for local governments to go through license renewal applications. Don't let businesses lose their licenses because of that. Suspend or postpone license renewal deadlines, [like Naperville, Illinois did for liquor licenses](#).
- ▶ **Suspend unnecessary ticketing.** In [New York City](#), Mayor De Blasio suspended police issuance of tickets for delivery bikes. In recognition of the increased demand on delivery workers, police in Idaho should stop issuing tickets for bicycles and scooters left temporarily on the sidewalk or street, even if they are left in an inconvenient spot.
- ▶ **Continue support of Airbnbs and similar services.** Some people want, or need, to isolate away from their primary residence for the safety of relatives — or for their own sanity.
- ▶ **Release low-level, nonviolent inmates.** [Cuyahoga County in Colorado is releasing inmates from its county jail](#) into the community, or placing them under house arrest. Jails are high-risk environments for viruses due to the close proximity of inmates, so Idaho should not risk a massive spread by crowding jails with nonviolent inmates.
- ▶ **Delay arrests for nonviolent crimes.** [Police in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, are temporarily detaining offenders](#) to gather their personal information, but delaying their arrests. After COVID-19 is over, the Philadelphia Police will issue warrants and arrest these nonviolent offenders. In other cities, police are temporarily suspending acting on existing warrants for low-level offenders.
- ▶ **Livestream public meetings.** Conduct public meetings over the internet, with video and audio availability. Add engagement options [like Longmont, Colorado](#) did, offering remote video testimony.
- ▶ **Extend property tax payment periods.** [Toronto, Canada has taken similar action](#) in recognition of the economic burden that COVID-19 will impose on businesses and individuals alike.
- ▶ **Give more than 48 hours notice before any emergency order goes into effect.** Individuals and businesses need time to prepare for the economic impact that most emergency orders impose.
- ▶ **Establish a criteria that businesses can meet to either reopen (if they have been forced to shut down) or remain open.** Many of the individuals and businesses affected by emergency orders cannot adequately cope with the indefinite time frame of the orders imposed on them, especially if that order is for them to be shut down indefinitely. If a local government issues an emergency order to shut down businesses, it should establish a criteria for businesses to reopen. For example, meeting heightened cleanliness practices, enforcing social distancing, and the like. Local governments can work with the governor of Idaho to see how setting up this criteria would mesh with his stay-at-home order. Setting up this criteria gives individuals and businesses something to look forward to and work toward.

- ▶ **Encourage private sector solutions.** Private organizations are ready and prepared to offer solutions to the COVID-19 crisis. Let them. Don't duplicate the work of food pantries, aid organizations, and similar nonprofits that can provide private assistance.
- ▶ **Overall, do everything possible to preserve and promote the ability for individuals and local businesses to make their own decisions.** Forcing decisions for them (like a mandated shutdown) places an incredible economic burden on large and small businesses alike. This burden will, at the very least, inconvenience their relationship with their customers and, at the worst, result in some businesses never re-opening.

Note: Brief released March 24, 2020. This revised version was released March 26, 2020.

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