



## **GOV. ABBOTT OUTLINES PLAN TO RELAX RESTRICTIONS AND GRADUALLY REOPEN TEXAS ECONOMY**

*By Samuel King  
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Gov. Greg Abbott announced a plan to gradually reopen aspects of the state's economy, with a goal of allowing Texans to return to work while containing the spread of COVID-19.

A new "strike force" made up of state leaders and health officials will advise the governor on next steps, he said at a news conference Friday, with more plans to be announced in a week.

"Texans are battling a colossal challenge, an invisible enemy that has tested our lives and tested our livelihoods," Abbott said. "Together, we can bend the curve. Together we can overcome this pandemic. We can get folks back to work."

At the same time, Abbott announced school buildings will remain closed through the end of the school year, as health officials have determined it is still unsafe for students to gather in large numbers. Teachers will be allowed in classrooms for video instruction, administrative tasks and to clean out their classrooms.

Abbott said despite the need for more testing capacity, there's enough data collected so far to begin to make decisions about which businesses and activities can reopen.

"The number of infections and hospitalizations is beginning to level off. We have a steady supply of PPE like face masks. We have plenty of hospital rooms and ventilators to treat," he said. "Our fellow Texas deaths, while far too high, will not come close to the early dire predictions."

He issued an executive order that allows businesses not previously considered essential to offer "retail-to-go" services beginning next week. Customers will still not be allowed to enter those stores yet, though.

In the short term, the order loosens some restrictions on surgeries beginning Monday, provided there is enough personal protective equipment or PPEs.

Abbott also ordered that state parks be reopened Monday, with groups no larger than five people. Those going to state parks will also be required to wear masks or face coverings

and must maintain a distance of 6 feet from people who are not members of their own household.

In a conference call after the announcement, Texas Democrats criticized the governor's plan, calling it vague and lacking in specifics on testing.

"It's hard to flatten the curve when our leaders have been so far behind it," U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro said. "The response has been slow all around and delay has cost people their lives."

He said Abbott had done a "terrible job" with testing.

"Throughout this pandemic, Gov. Abbott's response has been that more tests are coming, they're coming," Castro said, "and yet they've never come."

Business leaders, meanwhile, welcomed Abbott's announcement, saying they are pleased there is at least a framework in place.

"We hope that we can continue to, with safeguards, open the economy slowly and over the next few weeks and months, get back to a sense of normalcy in terms of commerce and people out and about enjoying their lives," said **Justin Yancy, president of the Texas Business Leadership Council.**

Health experts said they were also encouraged by the governor's willingness to use data to guide decisions about which businesses will reopen, but cautioned it's still too soon to tell how the pandemic will unfold.

"His comments about the opening of the economy are coming at a time when ... from the scientists' perspective, it's too soon, but from the people who work in restaurants and in retail stores, it's not soon enough," said Dr. Bijal Balasubramanian, epidemiologist and regional dean of the UTHealth School of Public Health, Dallas campus. "I appreciate both those perspectives, you know, but a little bit more time to see cases were going down would have helped us."

The overall stay-at-home order remains in effect until April 30.