

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT  
COVID 19 – THE NEED FOR FURTHER ACTION  
THE HON PREMIER  
11<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2020

Mr. Speaker, let me firstly thank you and this Honourable House for the opportunity to make this important statement at this stage in today's proceedings.

It was nine months ago today that the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic and since that time we have witnessed a number of countries near and far wage war on the invisible but impactful virus that causes the disease we know all too well - COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, recognizing the growing sense of helplessness among some populations and the challenging manner in which those nations which pride themselves as “first world countries” set out to combat the virus, Bermuda acted early and decisively. Our immediate actions and compliance with public health advice allowed us to save lives and salvage some economic activity.

In the months following March 11<sup>th</sup>'s declaration, Bermuda implemented a phased approach to a new normal which has seen our airport reopen, all trade and businesses resumed and schools providing in-person instruction. On the basis of what we as a community achieved we successfully created a programme to attract others to our shores to work while their own countries came to grips with the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, regrettably and as has been the case in other countries, things have changed. Our country status has been elevated from sporadic cases to clusters of cases and today there are seven confirmed clusters which are at the heart of this outbreak. Mr. Speaker, though we have many cases and several clusters, it is due to the excellent work by our health team in contacting and isolating, testing and following up with confirmed cases, we have to date not moved to the WHO definition of Community Transmission.

Mr. Speaker, it is against this backdrop that we take the actions I announce today. I am determined, as is the Honourable Member the Minister of Health and the entire Government, that we do all that we can to prevent the declaration of community transmission in Bermuda.

Mr. Speaker, this means that it is essential that we must now reinstitute some of the restrictions that contained the initial outbreak earlier in this pandemic period. Mr. Speaker, I can inform this Honourable House and the public that in a meeting held last night, the Cabinet has approved the following measures which will take effect from 6am on Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> December:

- A curfew will be in effect from 11pm until 6am daily
- All businesses will be required to close at 10pm
- The maximum permitted number of people in any group will be reduced further to ten
- Gyms will be required to operate at reduced capacity; and
- Those personal services like barbers, hairdressers, massage therapists and spa technicians will not be permitted to provide those services that require a mask to be removed.

Mr. Speaker, these restrictions are not imposed lightly or wantonly. They are guided by public health advice and based on the trends identified in both the average age of the confirmed positive cases and by the results of the contact tracing. The numbers do not lie and the story they are telling cannot be ignored. This outbreak is being driven by residents, more specifically young residents. More than ½ of the new infections reported over the last 6 days are residents under the age of 30.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is important to set out clearly why these actions are being taken now as opposed to after we determine the impact of those changes made earlier this week. Mr. Speaker, In the past 6 days we have reported 86 new confirmed cases. It is the view of the Ministry of Health that the numbers will get worse before they get better. It is therefore essential that we implement further action now to avoid possible harsher action later.

These additional actions, layered upon the actions that were announced earlier, will serve as a further insurance policy. If the actions that were taken earlier this week prove to be effective in halting this outbreak, that would be welcome; however if they are not - then it makes more sense to layer further actions on top now, -vs- waiting until December 22nd to judge their effectiveness.

As I stated on Sunday, we will review where we as a country stand on December 22nd, to judge what our next steps will be.

I am conscious of the economic impact this will have and I am sensitive to the festive season in which this is taking place and I know that people are tired and worn from the change that 2020 has brought to our lives.

Mr. Speaker, make no mistake, the threat is real. Thankfully, hospitalizations remain low but these numbers of positive cases make that an ever-decreasing likelihood of continuing unchanged. People of a certain age will know the expression: "Joyful nights bring sorrowful days."

Mr. Speaker, we must avoid a scenario where the actions of some lead to the death of others. Just as our actions in the spring saved lives, preserved health, safeguarded our most vulnerable and gave us the foundation on which to found an economic recovery, so these preventative measures will do the same in December.

Mr. Speaker, the adoption of these actions will form part of a revised set of public health regulations which will provide for the necessary exemptions from their provisions which previously applied. That process will be revived and the Ministry of National Security will again be prepared to effect the permissions required for those whose movement within the hours of curfew must be sanctioned.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members are advised that stronger public health guidance will be issued to encourage less community activity and urge residents not to mix households for at least the next 14 days. Mr Speaker, many businesses have maintained or returned to remote working. I am advising both public and private sectors that the strong public health advice is: If you can work remotely, you should do so. The Head of the Public Service has already determined how this will impact the front facing operations of government and public sector employees will be advised by Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Departments.

Mr. Speaker, with the growing numbers of people who are either testing positive or are identified as close contacts of those who have, there is a need to ensure that clusters are contained and do not extend. I am therefore grateful to the management of the Coco Reef hotel who have agreed to offer a specially negotiated rate of \$79 per night for those who cannot quarantine at home.

Mr. Speaker, the skilled and committed men and women of the Ministry of Health are operating at full bore in the testing, tracing and monitoring work this pandemic has caused. The scale of this outbreak is testing their systems and taxing their stamina. They are meeting the challenge daily, but it is difficult - and they are becoming stretched. Our Government Lab received over 1800 samples yesterday for testing, smashing any previously recorded daily record. Additional help has been called in and additional resources are being brought to bear.

Why do I raise this Mr. Speaker? I raise it because, the moment the health system breaks and the people within cannot maintain the pace at which they must operate to contain outbreaks such as this; we run the risk of entering the realm of community transmission and at that point we cannot say what Bermuda will encounter. One thing is for certain, it will certainly jeopardise our hard earned progress to date, and we must all work together to ensure that doesn't happen.

This means that we all have to play our part.

1. Do not be your own Doctor. Follow public health advice. If you haven't been exposed please don't take up valuable testing slots for those who may have been exposed.
2. Don't book multiple tests on multiple days. The booking system is being modified to prevent this, but one of the challenges Mr. Speaker, is that persons were booking multiple tests on multiple days.
3. Be patient. In Bermuda we are spoiled because we are used to receiving our results in sometimes as little as 6 hours. The results will take a little bit longer than normal, so please be patient.

Mr. Speaker, now is not the time to panic. Now is not the time for Bermudians to start fending for themselves. Now is not the time for us to turn on each other.

Now is the time to remember that we are really in this together - and it is essential that we embrace that community spirit so important to our island's progress to date.

Mr. Speaker, as The Honorable Minister of Health said earlier today Vaccines are on the way. We have technology launched today in the form of the WeHealth Bermuda App so that people who are exposed can receive anonymous exposure notifications. We have the tools at our disposal and we have an amazing team of committed healthcare workers who will continue this fight.

Mr. Speaker now is not the time for pointing fingers, there will be plenty of time for examination over what happened with this outbreak and how exactly did we get this point.

Lessons have been learned and we have increased the protections at our border, to bolster the protections provided to our country. The Ministry of Health has revised the activities allowed for travellers and all persons who arrive in Bermuda will be subject to those restrictions. Additionally, with the new agreement announced yesterday with US retail giant COSTCO to get a pre-test, there is no longer an excuse for residents to not obtain a valid pre-test prior to boarding. Therefore the fee a resident to return without a pre-test will be increased from \$30 to \$300. This increase will discourage residents from boarding flights without a valid pre-test, and will help to fund the enhanced monitoring of those persons arriving without a pre-test.

Mr. Speaker, while we enhance our protections we must also support those who will be negatively impacted by the actions the Government has taken. At 5PM today persons who have not been able to work due to closure notices, or who have been served with a quarantine notice and cannot work remotely can apply to receive benefits. The Minister of Finance has stated that any completed application received by 5PM on Monday will be processed and paid by next week Wednesday December 16th. Verified full time employees of bars and nightclubs who were closed will be eligible to receive \$1000 represented 2 weeks of the unemployment benefit. The Application will be live at 5PM today, and can be accessed at [uba.gov.bm](http://uba.gov.bm).

Information required will be as follows:

- Full name
- Social insurance number
- Mailing address
- Contact details (telephone number & email)
- Bank statement (without balances) to ensure payment to the correct bank account
- Employer name and contact information

Mr. Speaker, I know that this is not the news this Government wanted to deliver, or that the people we serve in this Honourable House want to hear. However Mr. Speaker, I firmly believe that these are the correct steps to take.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the support of the Leader of the Opposition; not only in the statement of support he graciously issued earlier this week, but also for his confirmation of support of these new measures when we spoke by phone earlier today.

Mr. Speaker, before I close, I want to pay special homage to the men and women of our Health & Pandemic response teams; the people manning the phones, collecting test samples, processing coronavirus tests, communicating to residents, tracing down contacts, assessing businesses, designing guidance, drafting laws, handling arriving passengers, enforcing quarantine, and responding to the media. Mr. Speaker these men and women are our army in this war, and it is our country's responsibility to support their fight.

Mr. Speaker, I commend these measures for the support of the whole House and would ask that Honourable Members join me in this all out effort to keep Bermuda safe.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.