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OPINION

How to stem coronavirus in Florida? Here's what former public health leaders say. | Column

We know what needs to happen and who can handle this crisis. It's time for state and federal leadership to make that happen.



Tampa Bay Times



A health care worker air dries her gloves after sanitizing her equipment while working at a walk-up COVID-19 testing site during the coronavirus pandemic in Miami Beach. People getting tested are separated from nurses via a glass pane. [LYNNE SLADKY | AP]

By **Charles S. Mahan, Edward Feaver, Paul Arons, Landis Crockett and Leslie Beitsch**

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Often, in the midst of a crisis like this pandemic, we are driven by the tyranny of the urgent, with limited opportunity to step back and reflect upon actions taken to date. But Florida coronavirus cases have surpassed those of *entire* countries hard hit by the virus like Spain and the United Kingdom, and the six-month death count is more than died of flu and AIDS combined in Florida last year. We must collectively ask ourselves whether continuing along the same pathway will provide the best outcomes for our state, or should we consider mid-course modifications?

From our perspective as former public health leaders in Florida, the response to the pandemic should be non-political. In fact, despite differing opinions on the value of local decision-making — governing closest to the citizenry — COVID-19 does not respect jurisdictional boundaries of cities and counties, states or even nations. Often, free-range humans disregard those boundaries as well. This

means that public health protections are only as strong as the weakest link in the public health system — and argues for decisive statewide and national policies and leadership based on the following principles:

Follow the science.

The coronavirus science is rapidly evolving in a real-time laboratory, and that requires frequent adjustments in actions, based upon emerging knowledge, to maximize protecting human lives.

Rely on public health, not solely clinical expertise.

Public health and preventive medicine are disciplines requiring years, even decades of training and experience. Call on those who have gained these credentials to be key decision-makers in our Florida pandemic plan. This means a more visible role for Florida Surgeon General Rivkees and his Florida Department of Health team. They are managing the logistics of testing, protective gear, telehealth and data collection, coordinating with the Department of Corrections and AHCA/Medicaid behind the scenes, but their efforts are underutilized in rallying public opinion and cooperation in disease control. Such an approach has worked effectively ever since yellow fever was a scourge, smallpox was a deadly disease, polio was a threat, and HIV invaded our state.

Centralize a statewide strategy.

As we anxiously await a vaccine and more effective treatments, use tools we know protect us:

- ◆ Require masks in all public places and group settings statewide.
- ◆ Socially/physically distance, limit group size.
- ◆ Develop clear metrics based on CDC guidance and erring on the side of caution for phasing in re-opening of our economy, venues, and schools; follow them, and report progress and setbacks transparently

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- ◆ Ensure that our public health system has the resources and authority necessary to effectively discharge its responsibilities and provide the expertise to guide our state's response to this challenge.

We have seen what happens with shortcutting the timeline of an implacable virus, even with the best of intentions, in response to public impatience. Florida should implement the recommendations above for however long it takes to suppress cases to a level where the occasional blip will yield to intensive contact tracing and isolation. This strategy can lead to safe partial reopening till there is effective outpatient medication and/or a vaccine.

Not incidentally, this will require a commitment by elected leadership — state and federal — to invest in the resources to sustain our population and economy during the pause.

All of us are anxious for a rapid return to some form of normalcy, including children in schools, and restoration of our vibrant economy. Yet none of us wish to sacrifice our most vulnerable, young and old, in this process.

Public health has shown it can overcome pandemics if given the opportunity, and the time to do so is now. Congress has shown it can rise to the occasion with the CARES Act. We should insist that our elected state officials and federal senators and representatives regroup, work in full partnership with public health and

across party lines in the public interest, to take the next steps and lead us successfully through this challenge.

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