

June 8, 2020

The Honorable Michael J. Dunleavy
Governor of Alaska

Dear Governor Dunleavy,

Thank you for taking precautionary measures regarding COVID-19. The Alaskan physicians and healthcare workers who sign this letter encourage you to mandate the use of masks by customers and employees in businesses open to the public where 6-foot distancing is unrealistic. Recent medical studies and real-world evidence support the use of masks to prevent the spread of the virus.

We are concerned about the recent and rapid increase in COVID-19 case counts in Alaska(1). We want a healthy and robust economy in Alaska, and a healthy economy needs healthy consumers and workers. More consumers will feel safe patronizing businesses when they know the risk of infection is reduced. In the absence of mandated masking, many Alaskans will continue to shelter in place rather than risk infection. We also want to avoid another lock-down, which would further harm the economy.

There is now robust scientific evidence that masks play an important role in preventing the spread of the virus. A systematic review published June 1st, 2020 in the Lancet looked at 172 studies and found the most effective ways to decrease transmission of the coronavirus include social distancing and universal mask wearing(2). This is a very inclusive study with the highest quality methodology, and was published in one of the most respected medical journals. We can be confident in the results.

We also have real-time examples of countries that adopted mask wearing and as a result decreased viral infections. In the Czech Republic, masks were mandated in early March for anyone outside their homes. Within two weeks they had an 80% decrease in transmission of the virus(3). Austria had a similar phenomenon with a 90% decrease in infections two weeks after adopting mask mandates(4).

Widespread mask use is so effective because viral transmission often occurs through respiratory droplets (coughs, sneezes, exhales)(5). If people infected with the virus wear masks, then these respiratory droplets are trapped in the mask material. This is especially important in the case of asymptomatic carriers. In fact, up to half of the people who spread the virus are infected but don't know it yet(6).

The takeaway is this: a sick person wearing a mask will spread fewer viral particles. A healthy person wearing a mask will have some protection from sick people around them. The combination of both people wearing masks provides the greatest amount of protection.

Masks are a very low-risk intervention. Masks are safe for the vast majority of people. They are not recommended for certain groups, such as children under two years old, or some people with serious underlying lung conditions under the advice of their clinician(7). There is no solid

evidence for carbon dioxide build-up or mental status changes from long-term cloth mask use in the general public. Many people, like healthcare workers, use masks on a daily basis for years.

Moreover, masks are available. Initially the public was told to not wear masks in order to conserve them for medical use due to shortages. Now there are non-medical grade masks available for the public. The use of masks is recommended by the CDC, the World Health Organization, and by our own State (8,9,10). Unfortunately, this recommendation appears insufficient to effect the behavioral change needed to protect Alaskans, limit viral spread, and successfully launch our economy. In the United States, as of June 5th, the majority of States and the District of Columbia have face mask requirements (11).

As we've seen, if universal masking in businesses is not mandated, it becomes difficult for individual businesses to ask customers to wear them. This is especially concerning in light of the recent rise in case counts this past week. At the beginning of the pandemic in March, cases were clustered in just a few communities. Now we are seeing cases widespread throughout Alaska. Without a mandate for mask wearing, this trend may accelerate.

In addition to supporting our economy, we need to do everything we can to continue to reduce viral transmission so we don't overwhelm Alaska medical systems, which is still a possibility. We thank you for the early lock-down order for Alaska. Because of this, we flattened the curve. We now need to take the next steps to bridge our communities to a vaccine or better treatment options. This requires a new way of living, and we recognize masks are part of this new reality. We strongly urge you to enact the appropriate Health Mandate requiring universal mask wearing in businesses.

Sincerely,

Aaron Kusano, MD, SM
Alexander von Hafften, MD
Alexandria Gallagher
Alison Sarasin, RN
Allison Gibbs, MD
Allison Kelliher, MD
Ann Ehret, DO
Anne Hanley, DO
Amber Stubbs, DPT
Ashley Lundgren Strum, MD
Ashley Widmer, MS1
Barbara Norton, CNM, APRN
Bartholomew Grabman, MS2
Becky Taylor, DO
Bradley K. Cruz, MD
Bethanee Gibson, NCMA
Brian J McMahon MD
Brigette L. Hofmann

Brooke Dudley, DPT
Bruce Chandler, MD
Carol Paredes, MD
Cathy Wick, PharmD
Charles M Herndon, MD
Chris Kottra, MD
Christina Darby, MD
Christy Tuomi, DO
Cindy Knall, PhD
Claire Stoltz, MD
Colleen Curley, CRNA
Corrine Leistikow, MD
Courtney Stroh, MS1
Cynthia Mildbrand, MD
Daron Dykema, MD
David Williams, MD
Dax Cvancara, MS1
E Peek Ehlinger, MD
Elizabeth Pietralczyk, MD
Erin Royal, MD
Evan Gross, MS1
Eve Wiggins, MS2
Ferritha Leoncio, MD
Frances Wilson, MD
Gail B Kottra, RT
Gina Wilson-Ramirez, MD, MPH
Grayson T Westfall, MD
Haley Yerxa, CNM
Heather Alvarado, MS, PA ASCP
Heather Merkouris, MS
Holly Fisk, ANP
Holly Martinson, PhD
Hope Spargo, MS1
I. de Anzola
Ian van Tets, PhD
Jacqueline Hoffman, MLS
Jaime Butler, MD
Jane A. Heisel, MD
Janice Koval, MD
Janine D. Miller, MD
Jean Snyder, MD

Jean Tsigonis, MD, MPH
Jennifer Sheasley, MS1
Jenny Lessner, MD
Jess Sotelo, MD
Jessica Panko, MD
Jill Klein, MS
John Bramante, MD, FACP
John J Kottra, MD
John Naylor, MD
Johnna Kohl, MD
Joshua Hejl
Joy Warth, LPN
Juiana Shields, MD
Julia Franklin, MD
Julie Sicilia, MD
Kahnaz Khari, MD
Karen McLane, FNP
Karin Harp, MD
Kate Lukshin, MS1
Kathy McCue, MD
Katie Naylor, MD
Keira Stroh, CNA
Keira Stroh, CNA
Kelly Murphy, RN, MSN
Kendrick D. Blais, DO
Kimberly Houghton, MD
Kirsten Reinbold, MD
Kristen Burdette
Kristen Wood, LAc
Kristin M Mitchell, MD, FACP
Kristina James, MD
Laura Levoy, MD
Laura Schroder, PhD
Laura Schulz, MD
Laurie Montano, MD
LaVerne Saccheus, RN
Leif Lunøe, MD
Leiza O. Johnson, RN
Leslie Cayco-Travis, DO
Lily Lou, MD

Lisa Alexia, PA-C
Lisa Rabinowitz, MD
Lisa Wolff, MD
Lorraine Kottra, MD
Mackenzie French, MS2
Maggie Hejl, LMT
Maren Gaul, DO
Maria E Mandich MD
Marie E McQueen, RN, ARNP
Marin Granholm, MD
Mary Ann Foland, MD
Mary Geist, MS1
Max Kullberg, PhD
Max Rabinowitz, MD
Megan Engler, PA-C
Megan Ritter, MD
Melinda M. Rathkopf, MD
Melissa Bruesch, RN
Melissa Hardesty, MD, MPH
Melissa Sundberg, DPT
Merijeanne Moore, DO
Michael Mraz, MD
Michelle Hensel, MD
Michael Swenson, MD
Mikhail Barson, RN
Monica Gaupp, MD
Natalie Velasquez, MD
Neil Murphy, MD
Owen Hanley DO, MPH
Peter Hulman, MD
Peter Schaab, MD
Priscilla Natcher, MS1
Rachel Samuelson, MD
Rande Lucas, LAc
Rhonda M. Johnson, DrPH
Robert Bundtzen, MD
Robin Holmes, MD
Roderic Smith, MD, PhD
Ronald Kim, MD
Ronald D Poole, MD, MPH

Roxanne Chan, RN, LAc
Sara Kozup-Evon, ANP
Sara Rutz, MS1
Sarah McCutcheon, MD
Sarah Murphy, MD
Sargam Kapoor, MD
Sean Cardinal, MD
Shannon Green, OT
Shannon Uffenbeck, PhD
Sharon Hulman, RN, MPH
Stephanie Eklund, MD, FACOG
Stephanie Wilson, LMT
Steven Compton, MD
Summer Engler, MD
Susannah Ølnes, MD
Tamara Dietrich
Tanya Leinicke, MD
Therese Tomazoski, MD
Thomas C. Wood, MD
Thomas Quimby, MD
Tiffany Peterson, MD
Tim Hinterberger, PhD
Tina Tomsen, MD, FACOG
Toby Currin, DO
Toni Biskup, MD, MPH, FACP, FAAP
Tonya L Caylor, MD, FAAFP
Tracy Slager, DO
Victoria Murdock, MD

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