

Fed Up With Staying Home, Some Americans Push Back

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8-10 minutes

Americans impatient with continuing stay-at-home orders and other coronavirus-related restrictions have descended on several statehouses this week to clamor for governors to ease up and reopen the economy.

Some of the governors have rebuked the demonstrators, including in Kentucky, where Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear said during a briefing that reopening the state immediately “would absolutely kill people.”

The protests came as a record-shattering [22 million workers have sought unemployment benefits](#) during a month of coronavirus-related shutdowns, and many employees and business owners have grown frustrated with forced shutdowns of businesses, especially those that don't require large gatherings.

President Trump outlined new federal guidelines on Thursday to reopen the country, saying governors should take a "phased and deliberate approach" to restart their state economies. Photo: William Volcov/Zuma Press

“Keeping people locked in their homes to save lives is going to collapse the economy, which is also going to cost lives,” Matt Seely, a volunteer with the Michigan Conservative Coalition, a group that helped organize a large protest in Lansing on Wednesday, said in an interview.

The events have ranged from the raucous rally in Lansing, which drew more than 3,000 people by police estimates, to a quiet picnic Thursday in Richmond, Va., that 40 people attended before authorities closed the gates to the square outside the state Capitol building.

In Raleigh, N.C., where about 100 people gathered Tuesday, police charged a 51-year-old woman with violating an executive order that limits gatherings to 10 people, a misdemeanor. The woman was given multiple opportunities to comply with the order “but chose not to do so,” said a spokesman for the state Department of Public Safety.

In Lansing, people protested Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s recent order expanding stay-at-home restrictions. They blocked traffic around the Capitol, and some protesters stood with guns a few feet from each other outside the building. Some chanted, “Lock her up!”





Protesters outside the Michigan State Capitol in Lansing on Wednesday.

Photo: jeff kowalsky/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Ms. Whitmer had recently announced an extension of a state of emergency until the end of April. New measures include limiting the number of shoppers depending on the size of a store. One provision orders certain stores to close off some sections, including those for gardening supplies, saying they are nonessential, prompting the state's greenhouse industry to say it will be devastated by the move.

The [Facebook](#) page for the protest, dubbed "Operation Gridlock," listed as hosts the Michigan Conservative Coalition and Michigan Freedom Fund, a conservative advocacy group. Organizers of the protests said Ms. Whitmer's action was a government overreach.

Tiffany Brown, a spokeswoman for Ms. Whitmer, said the governor supports the right to protest but that participants shouldn't put themselves or others at risk.

"It is disappointing to see people congregating without masks, and without practicing social distancing," she said in a

statement. “This kind of activity will put more people at risk, and it could mean that more people will die.”

The Michigan Freedom Fund, which has backing from the DeVos family, wasn't the main organizer, but did spend \$250 advertising the event on Facebook, said Tony Daunt, the group's executive director, in an interview Thursday. Mr. Daunt said his group was listed as a host on the Facebook page because it had advertised the event, but that the Michigan Conservative Coalition was the lead organizer.

The DeVos family, which includes Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, are prominent conservative donors. They have donated to the group, but weren't involved with the protest held Wednesday, said Nick Wasmiller, a spokesman for the family. Most demonstrators stayed in their vehicles, but about 150 people were on foot, the Michigan State Police said. One attendee, a 45-year-old man, was arrested for simple assault against another protester.

Mr. Seely said the organizers of the protest urged attendees to practice social distancing. “It is only this group of jerks that descended on the steps to the Capitol and on the lawn,” he said.

In Kentucky, demonstrators carried homemade signs and American flags while chanting slogans like “Facts over fear” and “We want to work” outside the state Capitol in Frankfort.

Erika Calihan said she helped organize Wednesday's protest by posting on Facebook that she planned to take her children to the Capitol. She said many people practiced social distancing, though there were also family members who clustered together.

Ms. Calihan, who estimated hundreds of people turned out, said Mr. Beshear, by keeping the state largely shut down, “is looking out for a very small percentage of Kentuckians, rather than looking out for all Kentuckians.”

“We’re not sure why we can’t operate just like the big businesses and put in safety precautions, and thereby potentially protect people and at the same time make a living,” said Ms. Calihan, whose husband is a small-business owner.

“If people are frightened,” she said, “they can choose to stay at home.”

Protesters’ chants and a horn could be heard as Mr. Beshear updated the public on the pandemic, including news that seven more state residents had died of Covid-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

“Everybody should be able to express their opinion,” the governor said. “They believe we should reopen Kentucky immediately, right now. Folks, that would kill people.”

Thursday’s picnic in Richmond was organized by three groups including Reopen Virginia, which was formed Sunday and grew out of Facebook discussions, said organizer Markie Kelly. The group’s Facebook page has 19,000 members with 10,000 requests pending, she said.

“It is one thing to say there is a virus out there and it has put this amount of people in the hospital and this amount of people have died from it. It is another thing to say ‘stay home, do not leave your house, you cannot work if you’re this type of business,’” said Ms. Kelly, a 31-year-old stay-at-home mother.

Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam on Wednesday said he would extend until May 8 an emergency order that bans crowds of more than 10 people; closes recreation, entertainment and personal-care businesses; and limits restaurants to takeout and delivery.

“Gov. Northam will continue to make decisions based in science, data and public health,” a spokeswoman for the governor said.

A Virginia Capitol Police spokesman said police were alarmed by a Facebook notice for the picnic because it said “hugging, closeness and sharing of dishes is encouraged.”

Ms. Kelly defended the choice of words. “We didn’t say you have to do this, but yeah, if people want to hug each other, let them do it,” she said.

After about 40 people had arrived, police closed the gate to Capitol Square, said the police spokesman, Joe Macenka.

“We then went over to the group and asked them if they could please try and maintain safe social-distancing practice,” he said. “They did that, so we left them alone at that point.”

—Kris Maher contributed to this article.

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