



MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

By

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Premier

An Update on Moving Beyond the Pandemic

Friday, 10th September 2021

Mr. Speaker, when this Honourable House rose on 23rd July, the country eagerly anticipated Cup Match, witnessing the annual classic and enjoying this summer highlight with family and friends. We did that, **Mr. Speaker** and we did so safely. The strict enforcement of practices adopted to keep us safe showed that we could adjust our lives to live with COVID-19 and enjoy different versions of traditional events and celebrations. **Mr. Speaker**, since the Cup Match holiday we have seen an increasingly casual and almost cavalier approach to those very same practices that have kept us safe since the declaration of the global pandemic in March 2020.

Mr. Speaker, just a little over 3 weeks ago as case numbers began to rise, the Government announced new requirements for the use of SafeKey for indoor activities where masks were are removed.

Since that time, in a matter of weeks, active cases have quadrupled to over 500 and there are now more than 20 residents in hospital for 5 persons in the ICU. My colleague the Honourable Minister of Health set out in comments earlier this week how this outbreak has been fuelled by people ignoring the basics and going to work when unwell. The same must be said of family and a business who failed to follow the traveller continuum on their return to Bermuda and caused a cluster in a school/camp setting. There are many other examples of persons not following the rules that have been made to prevent the spread of this deadly virus. The culmination of this is that we now have a wave most harshly affecting the unvaccinated - those who cannot be vaccinated due to age or medical condition, and those who to date have chosen not to be vaccinated.

Mr. Speaker, we now have community transmission. There are a significant number of cases under investigation and the increased community testing continues to identify positive cases. In 2020, we would have been considering additional public health restrictions, a curfew, or even another period of shelter in place. But **Mr. Speaker**, it is not 2020. 66% of our population is fully vaccinated and the data around this outbreak confirms that its scale and scope is being driven by transmission unvaccinated persons to other unvaccinated persons. With our vaccination strategy validated by the protection against serious disease provided to vaccinated persons we are not where we were in 2020 and not where we might have been with lower vaccination rates.

Therefore, 2020's blanket measures, that affect all persons and all businesses despite their compliance with the rules, will not be immediately applied to this period in 2021. As long as we are able to properly manage the care of those who need medical attention generally and those persons with COVID-19 we have no need to revert to lockdowns and curfews; but, Mr. Speaker, these measures remain a possibility if we cannot take care of the sick in the community. We must continue to adjust our lives, to live with the coronavirus, and not so interrupt our lives that we again cannot worship communally, dine out as a family or go to work to earn a living. The people of Bermuda, who by and large are follow the rules, should not be subject to further interruption of their lives & livelihoods caused by persons who do not follow the precautions in place that will keep us all safe.

Mr. Speaker, since March of 2020, this Government has provided thousands of tests free of charge. Not one person in this country has paid for a vaccination. The Government has not mandated testing save for participation in sport or in compliance with exemptions granted for large groups. The Government has not mandated vaccination for any resident, in spite of other, similar jurisdictions doing so for work permit holders, frontline workers and public sector officers. This has been a study in the emphasis of personal choice, enhanced by public information and constant encouragement to consult one's doctor. **Mr. Speaker**, the various orders and regulations implemented since March 2020 have been measured and indicative of an overarching aim of keeping this community, and in particular it's most vulnerable citizens, safe. None of this changed. None of this will change.

Mr. Speaker, this next phase of moving beyond the pandemic cannot have blanket Government intervention in the management of areas of the economy, cultural life or casual interaction as its cornerstone. This next phase must have at its core a theme of personal responsibility. We must now take charge of our own interactions and act sensibly and safely. This means that if an event is for 20 people then 20 it must be. This means that if we are in a setting where mask wearing is mandated or strongly recommended then you should wear a mask. This means that we cannot act like COVID-19 is a thing of the past and party like its 2019. **Mr. Speaker**, the stage is set, the information is widely available and we, as a community **know** what we should and should not do in order to keep ourselves, our families, and each other safe.

Mr. Speaker, save for changes to group sizes the details of which will be confirmed by the Honourable Minister of Health later today, there are no major proposed changes to the existing public health regulations at this time - because that which is in place, if properly followed, is enough to keep us safe. Therefore, there will be a redoubled effort to fully enforce the rules that are in place. Various elements of the public health enforcement teams will meet later today and coming out of that discussion I expect to see broader enforcement of the existing Regulations this weekend and beyond. Large groups granted an exemption should expect to be visited and be subjected to confirmation of the correct use of SafeKey and any other conditions under which the exemption has been granted. Licensed premises and indoor bars and restaurants can expect the same. The enforcement will be broad and my expectation is also that it will be fair. This is the only way that we will ease the growing pressure on the various elements of our healthcare system which are stretched and stressed.

Mr. Speaker, the current Regulations provide the Minister of Health with the authority to close offending establishments. A recommendation is likely to be made to extend that power to a senior Police Officer in keeping with previous practices under the former Regulations. This power would be used sparingly but the immediacy it affords will provide maximum protection in the event of an apparent serious breach.

Mr. Speaker, it should be clear that the Government desires a zero tolerance approach from enforcement agencies. If a place that is required to have SafeKey has patrons present with no valid SafeKey – it should be closed for a period according to law. If a place is not collecting contact tracing details as required, it too should be closed according to law. If an establishment that requires staff to be masked, and they are not masked it too should be closed in accordance with the law. The Government has implemented a fixed penalty regime and this too must be employed in the enforcement regime.

Mr. Speaker, before I close, I want to speak to the healthcare workers and first responders of Bermuda.

Mr. Speaker, our healthcare workers deserve better than what our residents are giving them. These dedicated men and women have been working flat out for seventeen months collecting test samples, running tests, collating statistics, sharing information, contact tracing, producing guidance, all while still taking care of

responsibilities outside of work. These are our fellow citizens, who have gone above and beyond, often putting themselves in harm's way. It is not fair to them to expect them to keep up the same pace and diligence when our residents are not following the rules and doing what is necessary to break the transmission of the coronavirus. The abuse that has been hurled in person from persons waiting to be tested, online to those conducting the tests, and by phone for those trying their best to deliver results is not acceptable. In Bermuda we have become accustomed to results the same day, testing availability the same hour, and people going the extra mile to accommodate last minute behaviour.

Mr. Speaker, this Government will not heap more stress on our healthcare workers and ask them to do more when they barely have the energy to keep up with their current workload. I must ask all persons in this country to be patient while our healthcare workers deal with this surge; things will take longer than they normally do because those on the frontline are human.

Mr. Speaker, for these last several months I have placed an emphasis on unity. Unity of purpose has led to the sight of home-porting cruise ships berthed at our ports. Unity of purpose has seen us welcome increased flights and leisure visitors. Unity of purpose has put people back to work and allowed them to again earn in support of themselves and their families. That same unity must now be converted into **personal responsibility** to preserve and grow what we have achieved. People are still getting sick, some are unfortunately in the hospital and still others have sadly passed away.

Now is not the time for us to act with wanton disregard and be resigned to a lockdown to solve a problem caused by that wanton disregard. As a country we've been doing this for 17 months, and now it's time for each of us to adjust our behaviour, follow the rules, and take personal responsibility to do our part to reverse the current trend, and end this outbreak.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker.**