



**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**BY**

**THE HON. KIM N. WILSON, JP, MP**

**MINISTER OF HEALTH**

**LIVING WITH COVID – THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY**

**4 February 2022**

**Mr Speaker,** Honourable Members,

As I reflect back on the past 26 months, it actually pains me to recall the huge devastation caused to, and sacrifices made by, so many people in our community as we fought together against a pandemic never before seen in our generation as when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic.

On the 18 March, 2020, Bermuda recorded its first positive case of COVID-19, and on 1 April 2020 under section 14(3) of Bermuda's Constitution Order, the Governor declared that a state of emergency

exists in Bermuda. This was the precursor to the PUBLIC HEALTH (COVID-19) EMERGENCY ORDER 2020 as the Government deemed it necessary, in the interests of public health, to take extraordinary measures to prevent, control or suppress COVID-19. And, as such, it was declared that a public health emergency exists in Bermuda.

**Mr Speaker,**

In the intervening period, a number of quarantine and travel ban orders were made. In addition, critical public health restrictions were put in place:

- curfews were imposed,
- gathering sizes were restricted,
- households were prevented from mixing,
- working from home was required,
- schools were closed,
- most businesses were closed,
- gyms, restaurants, museums, movie theaters were all closed, and,
- the doors to places of worship were shut.

**Mr Speaker,**

This impacted the entire community as weddings were cancelled,

birthday parties were postponed, funerals were severely limited and visitations to loved ones in rest homes, hospitals and corrections facilities were halted.

Together, we witnessed wave after wave after wave of SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreaks. And, sadly, all too many people lost their lives due to COVID-19.

Much has changed over the course of the past 26 months.

The introduction of vaccines has greatly improved our chances with respect to how we mitigate against the devastation caused by COVID-19.

In November last year, I indicated to this House that the next step for all of us in Bermuda is to learn how to live with COVID-19, and we have arrived at that step.

As COVID-19 continues to run its course, scientists generally believe that SARS-CoV-2 virus will become endemic for many regions in the world; circulating amongst the population but causing fewer and fewer cases of severe disease or death. This will be due to immunity achieved largely through vaccination and, also, to a lesser extent, through recovery.

However, this will not happen overnight. There are a number of African nations, for example, where the vaccination rate is not yet 15% of the total population.

As of the end of Epi Week 4, January 29, 72% of Bermuda's total population is fully immunized against COVID-19. And, although the Omicron variant is still with us, compared with the Delta variant, we have so far experienced significantly fewer hospitalisations and deaths.

What does this mean? It means the pandemic is not over for the world but Bermuda is in a position as a country to move out of the substantive public health emergency restrictions.

In keeping with the stage Bermuda has reached, the Government is making the following changes to the Public Health (COVID-19 Emergency Powers) (Phased Re-opening) Regulations 2021:

- the size of large groups will increase from 20 to 100, and this includes weddings and funerals, as well as Island Boats,
- in restaurants, members clubs, bars, gyms and Island Boats, SafeKey will no longer be mandatory, which means a Student 7-

day Pass is no longer required for these venues.

Tables will continue to be limited to groups of ten and be spaced 6ft apart, and these dining establishments, bars and clubs will still be restricted to seated service only.

Most importantly, however, the requirement to wear a mask while indoors in all venues will continue. As Honourable Members know, this coronavirus is transmitted through the air as droplets. As such, wearing a mask, particularly indoors, will be vital for the foreseeable future. It is one of the greatest tools in our arsenal for the reduction of transmission.

The legislative and relevant public health guidance changes will take effect from noon today, Friday, 4 February.

The Government anticipates this transitional stage will continue until the end of March. From April onwards, the public health emergency will be in place to support only the continued requirement to wear a mask indoors.

**Mr Speaker,**

I cannot over-emphasise the importance of continuing with good public

health measures in addition to wearing a mask: wash your hands and maintain a physical distance of 6ft from others in crowded indoor and outdoor settings and, yes, get vaccinated.

Finally, **Mr Speaker**, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Bermuda community for their adherence to the public health restrictions. While necessary, we know these measures have taken a great toll economically, socially and in terms of our mental, if not, physical health. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker**, I would also like to extend a sincere thank you the Health teams for their incredible dedication and commitment to the people of Bermuda. The Chief Medical Officers, first, Dr Cheryl Peek-Ball and, then, Dr Ayo Oyinloye, have provided wise counsel and a steady hand throughout. And, health and other professionals across the spectrum of the health system - testing, diagnostic labs, contact tracing and case management, the hospital, the coroner, funeral homes – have worked long days, nights and weekends to keep us safe.

To all of you – Thank You.

Thank you, **Mr Speaker**.