

LOCAL TOWNS, SCHOOLS PREPARE FOR ARRIVAL OF COVID-19 VIRUS

By ISABEL KOYAMA and MIKE JACKSON

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FRANKLIN COUNTY – Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker declared a state of emergency Tuesday following an overnight spike in confirmed cases of COVID-19, the novel coronavirus that is sweeping the globe this month. As of Wednesday, the virus has been officially classified as pandemic by the World Health Organization.

With 95 presumed positive cases in-state, 7 of which are in Berkshire County, Franklin County health officials are preparing to face the arrival of COVID-19 to their communities.

Last Wednesday, Cooperative Public Health Service's (CPHS) regional public health nurse Lisa White attended a hearing at the Massachusetts State House where she testified before the Public Health Committee on the unique needs of rural towns in preparing for the coronavirus. At that time, White says, the only testing in state was being done by the State lab.

While no cases have been confirmed as of press time in any of Franklin County's 26 towns, it is possible that some cases are going undetected.

"We all know the basic preventable steps are the same as the flu," reports White, "Our risk is considered to be low, but do we think

COVID-19 is going to be circulating at a community level? I think that answer is yes."

White, who serves 14 communities for the CPHS district under Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), says that people should prepare to "behave differently" as the outbreak progresses, stocking up food pantries and being thoughtful about attending public events.

"We don't know if there has been community transmission because we're only testing severely ill individuals at this time," White says. "When there's more ability to test, there will be more information on the actual levels of infection."

"Knock on wood; at this point we don't have any [positive cases]," reports Montague public health director Daniel Wasiuk on his town's current status. Wasiuk, who has been communicating with fellow board members on a daily basis as of late, says they are taking it "one day at a time."

"We're monitoring [COVID-19] through our disease surveillance system, MAVEN," he says. "If there is a positive case, we will be notified. That's when the board of health has a legal responsibility to isolate or quarantine."

According to a Wednesday NECN report, at least 22 undergraduate institutions in New England – 14 of which are in Massachusetts – have decided to either close or move classes online in response to the rapid proliferation of COVID-19. This list includes the nearby Amherst College and UMass-Amherst.

Gill-Montague Schools

At Tuesday night's Gill-Montague school committee meeting, district superintendent Michael Sullivan reported that his administration is staying abreast of developments in the pandemic.

"There's a lot of good communication going on within the education world, and the healthcare world, within Massachusetts," he said. "I'm talking with the local boards of health.... It's very data-driven and level-headed."

Facilities manager Heath Cummings, Sullivan said, was being proactive about cleaning surfaces in the schools, including doorknobs and railings. Special sanitizer will be provided for shared computer stations, including ultraviolet wands.

In Wellesley, students were dismissed after a half day for a special cleaning of the schools, but no public elementary or secondary schools had yet been shut down. (On Wednesday, two schools in Wayland were shut down for a similar cleaning, and Hopkinton closed its schools indefinitely on the news that two patients in town had tested positive for the virus. Additional

closures were announced in Lynnfield, Arlington, Plainville, Chelsea, Framingham, Milford, Weston, Winchendon, Somerville, and Boston as press time.)

Technology teacher Katie Hopp, Sullivan reported, is currently surveying students to see how many have internet access that could allow them to work from home in the case of school cancellation.

"If they said 'you're sending your kids home for 14 days,' could we talk about doing 'blizzard bag' kind of teaching?" Sullivan asked.

Erving representative Theresa Kolodziej asked whether the school committee could meet remotely during a quarantine, given the requirements of the state open meeting law. The law states that a quorum must first be present together in public before remote participation is authorized by additional members.

"We'd have to have the crowds stay home," said Montague member Michael Langknecht.

Montague member Damkoehler pointed out that many families depend on school lunches. "There are a lot of families that are relying on the schools," she said. "If you think about how much kids eat, and think about adding two meals a day to the grocery bill for two weeks – sadly, that could break a family."

Sullivan said the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has reassured districts that if classes are canceled to comply with a quarantine, the school year

will not be extended into the summer – in Gill-Montague’s case, past June 18. Still, he said, compensatory services such as speech therapy that the district is required to provide would have to be made up, perhaps in summer school.

Information Pandemic

Erving board of health clerk Betsy Sicard told the *Reporter* Tuesday that there would be a district meeting on Wednesday night attended by health officials from Erving, Northfield, and Leverett to discuss COVID-19. With emails coming in from schools asking what to do about field trips and meetings, Sicard says there is an urgency to “get something concrete to tell the public.”

Greenfield mayor Roxann Wedegartner addressed the outbreak in a letter to Greenfield residents on March 6 outlining guidelines for how people can mitigate spread of the virus, including frequent hand washing, staying home when sick and avoiding touching the face.

Wedegartner met with the city’s fire chief, health director, superintendent of schools, and other department heads to address the city’s preparedness for a local outbreak. “The City is monitoring the situation and will keep the public informed,” she writes.

Montague health director Wasiuk says that his town’s board of health has been working in accordance with the state Department of Health and CDC guidelines

to “educate and do public outreach.” Still, mitigation is largely up to the individual. Along with general hygiene and social distancing, Wasiuk says that limiting non-essential travel is highly important.

But with several independent schools in the region on spring break, and Massachusetts public schools anticipating a week-long vacation in April, travel may be difficult to limit.

“That could be a precarious situation, depending on where they’re traveling to,” says Waisuk of hopeful spring vacationers. “It’s hard,” he adds. “They need to see the beach – we all do.”

For more information on the coronavirus response in our local towns, see frcog.org/covid-19-resources. More general advice can be found at www.flattenthecurve.com.

Franklin County: Most Unequal Pot Policing in Nation?

By ISABEL KOYAMA

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FRANKLIN COUNTY – A recent report from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) examining racial disparities in marijuana possession arrests featured a statistic many local residents may find surprising.

In 2018, according to the report, “Black people were more than 100 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than white people” in Franklin County, Massachusetts. This ratio places Franklin County at the very top of a table of the nation’s “Top 20 Counties for Racial Disparities in Marijuana Possession,” above Pickens County, Georgia, DeKalb County, Alabama, and Tazewell County, Illinois.

How and why did Franklin County end up at the top of this table?

The April 20 report, entitled *A Tale of Two Countries: Racially Targeted Arrests in the Era of Marijuana Reform*, is a follow-up to a 2013 ACLU report which analyzed data on marijuana possession arrests in all 50 states between 2001 and 2010. Looking at millions of arrests, that report found that across the board, black people were much more likely to be arrested for possession of marijuana than white people, despite the demographics having virtually the same usage rate.

This year’s report includes a discussion of states that have legalized recreational marijuana, where the overall number of possession arrests tends to have decreased. The ACLU’s findings reveal that, “disturbingly, too much has remained unchanged in the past decade despite several states having reformed marijuana policy.”

Massachusetts passed a ballot initiative to legalize marijuana and regulate its sales in November 2016. Marijuana has been legal in Massachusetts ever since, although the first retail cannabis stores didn’t open until November 2018.

The data that shows Franklin County's high disparity was calculated using 2018 crime data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, and comparing it against the United States Census' annual county population estimates and demographic breakdown.

That year in Franklin County, the researchers estimate, black residents were arrested for marijuana possession at a rate of 489.94 per 100,000 people, compared with a rate of 4.21 arrests per 100,000 white residents.

This 116-to-1 ratio was much higher than the 7-to-1 disparity the ACLU had calculated in the county for 2010, which earned Franklin County a second distinction in the report – the highest apparent jump in racial disparity over that time period.

This does not mean the county had a high arrest rate for marijuana possession. Pickens County, Georgia led the country for the overall rate of black residents arrested for possession: 31,243 per 100,000, or nearly one in three black residents of that county.

According to Census estimates for July 2018, Franklin County's total population was 70,963, of whom 66,577 (or 93.8%) were white, and 1,143 (or 1.6%) were black. This data does not include individuals who were identified as two or more races.

Using these figures, the rates listed in the ACLU's table would correlate with a total of 5.6 black residents, and 2.8 white residents, arrested for marijuana possession that year.

It is unclear whether this is accurate. A spokesperson from the Northwest District Attorney's Office agreed to look into the issue, but was unable to provide local arrest data as of press time.

The Greenfield police department did share records upon request. In 2018, according to a report tabulating "arrests on view & based on incident / warrants by race, sex, and age," a total of nine arrests involving marijuana were made in that city. The arrestees included seven white men, one white woman, and one black man.

"I can confirm from looking at the database that the one arrest/charge involving a black male was in April 2018 and the charge was possession with intent to distribute," Greenfield police records clerk Gillian Halkett told the *Reporter*.

Massachusetts has the lowest marijuana possession arrest rate overall, according to the ACLU report, but nationally, marijuana possession arrests are

still widespread; in 17 states, they even increased between 2010 and 2018. And the report shows clearly that racial disparities also persist, even in legalized and decriminalized states where marijuana possession arrests have decreased overall. "Much of this country has yet to start on the road toward equitable, smart, reparative marijuana policy," the organization highlights.

Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear whether Franklin County's ranking as the most unequal county in the country in the April report reflects ongoing disparity, or a statistical anomaly. *The Reporter* has reached out this week to the ACLU's Western Massachusetts office to discuss the report further, and will follow up in a future edition.

Additional reporting was contributed by Mike Jackson.

EVICCTIONS DELAYED UNTIL OCTOBER AS CRISIS LOOMS

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By **ISABEL KOYAMA**

FRANKLIN COUNTY – With federal assistance and protections provided under the CARES Act scheduled to expire at the end of next month, extended from an original end date of July 24, experts in economics and housing are warning of a national surge in eviction filings.

Massachusetts' 120-day moratorium on "non-essential" evictions and foreclosures was also due to end on August 18, allowing evictions to proceed after that date. However, news from the state house Tuesday announced a 60-day extension to the ban, until midnight on October 17.

"The extension I am declaring today will provide residents of the Commonwealth with continued housing security as businesses cautiously re-open, more people return to work, and we collectively move toward a "new normal," governor Charlie Baker announced this week.

Baker also pledged to "work closely with colleagues in the judicial branch to ensure that when eviction proceedings resume there are programs in place to help tenants pay their rent and avoid eviction."

Out of the Frying Pan

Emily Benfer, chair of the American Bar Association's Task Force Committee on Eviction, told CNBC two weeks ago that her

research estimates between 20 and 28 million people will face eviction nationwide between now and September. This would amount to more than twice the number of people who were displaced from their homes following the foreclosure crisis in 2008.

According to a national survey by Apartment List, as many as 32% of American households did not make a full payment on housing, whether mortgage or rent, in July.

Although the state-level moratorium on evictions has been extended, other forms of government assistance are due to expire soon. This includes the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, which has boosted unemployment checks by \$600 for the past three months and will end on July 31.

With the official unemployment rate in Massachusetts breaking records back-to-back in May and June, at 16.5% and 17.5%, respectively, the end of this crucial benefit could leave more residents unable to pay their bills.

Citing a June 2020 report by Boston tenants' rights group City Life/Vida Urbana, the *Boston Globe* reported that if and when eviction proceedings will be allowed to move forward, they will disproportionately affect neighborhoods with more people of color. "We are facing what could be dramatic levels of homelessness, and

neighborhood and city-wide instability," City Life executive director Lisa Owens told the *Globe*.

The statewide moratorium has also given homeowners the option of forbearance on their mortgage payments, effectively delaying payments due during the pandemic until the end of their mortgage term. Denise Coyne, chief operations officer at Greenfield Savings Bank, says 549 borrowers have taken advantage of this offer at their bank alone.

"What we ask is that people call us, and whatever they're experiencing, we'll try to work with them," Coyne told the *Reporter*. "We need to make sure we can help them with their payments so that they can concentrate on themselves and their families."

Coyne added that GSB is also focusing on making sure the 636 businesses they helped obtain Payroll Protection Program loans now get their loans forgiven. "We're very proud that we have both these programs in place," she said.

While the US House of Representatives passed a bill in March that would allocate \$100 billion to rental assistance and ban evictions for a year, sources say this bill has lost momentum in the Republican-controlled Senate.

At the state level, the Baker-Polito administration has made some options for financial assistance available to renters and homeowners in Massachusetts. In addition to the state's Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program, which has provided some assistance to families that are homeless or at risk of being homeless since 2005, a new Emergency Rental and Mortgage Assistance (ERMA)

program will respond more directly to the impact of COVID-19.

ERMA provides eligible low-income households with direct funding for housing payments. A press release from the governor's office last week said that the program "will expand eligibility for rental and mortgage assistance to more low-income households."

Into the Legislature

Pamela Schwartz, director of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness, praised the extension of the eviction moratorium in an interview with the *Reporter* this week.

"It's an excellent move, it's good," Schwartz said. "It allows us to pass laws."

Schwartz pointed to two bills in the current state legislative session, which ends July 31: "An Act to Guarantee Housing Stability During the COVID-19 Emergency and Recovery" (HD.5166/S.2831) and "An Act to Ensure Equal Counsel in Eviction Proceedings" (H.1358/S.913).

"There is no doubt that there is still much work to be done to support those most in need as we continue to address the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic," Natalie Blais, who represents the 1st Franklin District in the House, told the *Reporter*.

"While I am grateful to the Governor for recognizing the severe financial struggles that many residents of the Commonwealth are facing," Blais said, "there are many aspects of HD.5166 that still need consideration. I have heard from a number of property owners who are struggling to make ends meet during the moratorium, and I look forward to a discussion on how

we can best help them financially through a COVID-19 Housing Stability and Recovery Fund.”

“July 31 is a drop-dead date for these bills to pass,” Schwartz said. “These bills are urgent priorities... It goes without saying that the economic impact of COVID-19 has really just begun. It’s going to be huge, and devastating.”

Schwartz said that at a recent regional meeting of housing advocates, “there were observations, shared across every community, that there were more faces, and new faces. There’s a waiting list for shelters [in Greenfield].... The anecdotal reporting, from people working close to the ground in their communities, suggests a meaningful uptick in the number of people seeking emergency housing.”

“The good news,” Schwartz said, “is we have leaders that recognize this threat and are prepared to respond to this threat... All eyes, for these next ten days, are on doing what we need to do to get the legislature to pass these laws.”

ed. Mike Jackson, Managing Editor

[Dispensaries Reopen for Recreational Users]

[*The Montague Reporter*](#), 28 May 2020

By ISABEL KOYAMA

TURNERS FALLS - As certain businesses open with strict modifications during “phase one” of a four-phase reopening plan outlined by the state, Massachusetts’ cannabis industry has reopened to recreational customers as of Monday, May 25.

Of the 11 states where marijuana is fully legalized, Massachusetts is the only state in which adult-use recreational sales were deemed “non-essential” during the last two months.

An article in *the Boston Globe* dated May 18 reported that initially, Governor Charlie Baker expressed concern that dispensaries would draw out-of-state customers, thereby increasing possible spread of COVID-19. This decision has since received considerable pushback from the cannabis industry, who argued many recreational consumers may be using marijuana to self-medicate.

Municipal officials of cities and towns home to marijuana-related facilities also lamented the economic ramifications of this statewide closure in *the Globe* article, saying they rely on the tax revenue generated by marijuana sales.

“We typically get a fair amount of out-of-state customers,” commented John Snyder, chief operating officer of 253 Farmacy, an adult-use cannabis dispensary in Turners Falls that reopened to recreational consumers on Monday after being

closed for two months. Snyder said that the ratio of in-state to out-of-state customers over the last few days has been “pretty typical.”

Unlike some of its counterparts, 253 has opted not to deliver orders to car windows. Instead, customers wait in a socially-distanced line to pick up their pre-ordered purchases at an outdoor booth, all the while monitored and helped along by staff. Those paying with cash are handled separately, in a different line.

“On Monday, everybody was coming out of the woodwork,” reflected Snyder, adding that 253’s first day open was “hectic,” but that things were running more smoothly by Wednesday morning.

In the days since 253 reopened, Snyder said that he has noticed not only a rise in demand, but in volume. Customers are purchasing more cannabis.

“We have a pretty good idea - with no COVID - what the average purchase price of a customer looks like,” he said. “Now, people are easily buying double what they were before.”

THE NEW NORMAL

“For our adult-use customers, they use cannabis for a lot of the same reasons our medical customers use it: for anxiety, PTSD, et cetera,” Ben Sussman, outreach director of RiSE, a cannabis company with locations in several states including a dispensary in Amherst, told the Reporter.

Usually in charge of setting up volunteer opportunities, sponsorships, instore events, and community partnerships,

Sussman said his role has, unsurprisingly, “shifted drastically during the pandemic.”

As a co-located medical and adult-use dispensary, RiSE has remained open for patients in need of medical marijuana. Patients and recreational users have used separate entrances and exits since the store’s inception. But since reopening to recreational users on Monday, RiSE has been swamped with a surge of customers arriving curbside at predetermined times to pick up their online orders.

“That’s the ‘new normal’ we’re operating under,” said Sussman of the curbside pickup system. “Understandably, customers have a lot of questions. Some people are nervous. Guiding everyone through the process has been the biggest challenge.”

With curbside pickup designed to prevent crowding and maintain social distancing, Sussman said he hasn’t paid much attention to whether customers are from in or out of state: “Whether someone’s got a New York license plate or a Massachusetts license plate doesn’t matter. Either way, they’re in their cars.”

OUTDOOR SERVICE

“The closure of adult-use was definitely a big hit for us,” NETA president Amanda Rositano told the Reporter. “Many of our customers rely on cannabis for medical reasons, but don’t want to access it through a state registry. A lot of these folks are veterans or people with federal jobs.”

NETA’s registered marijuana dispensaries in Northampton and Brookline also opened Monday with a reserve-ahead

curbside pickup system, after “a handful of very long days and long nights of planning and preparation,” said Rositano.

Originally, NETA modified their dispensaries’ interiors to reopen to adult-use consumers, only to find out on short notice that they would have to offer “curbside pickup only.”

“Because we are deemed an essential service, we were really able to fine-tune our facilities to handle the return of adult-use in our stores, using markings for social distancing, barriers, and sanitizing throughout the day,” said Rositano. She adds that she looks forward to “phase two” of the statewide reopening, when NETA can streamline customer traffic at 30 indoor registers instead of serving customers at mobile terminals.

“We have the infrastructure and setup to do that much more efficiently in store,” she said.

The biggest challenge, according to Rositano, has been to meet the incredibly high demand of cannabis customers. “We open up online ordering around 9 p.m., and within 30 minutes we’ve sold out of 700 pickup time slots,” she said. “We’re [also] seeing a ton of traffic to our website, and an incredibly high volume of calls to our call centers.”

All things considered, Rositano said that the cannabis industry in Massachusetts is accustomed to adapting to new regulations on the spot, which in turn has helped their reopening process this week.

“We’re used to it,” she said, “The smoothness of the operation within a few days’ notice serves as an example of how we’re able to respond to changes instantaneously. We’re grateful for the opportunity to be open.”

STOCKING UP

Snyder, the 253 Farmacy COO, speculated that the reason his store is seeing a high sales volume might be a combination of customers having run out of product, and simply wanting to stock up on the off chance dispensaries close again.

The Turners Falls company grows and processes cannabis onsite, but opened its retail operations last year selling products sourced from other companies while its initial crops grew. Now they are beginning to sell their own marijuana as well.

"We've had concentrates in there for a little bit," said Snyder of 253's homegrown cannabis. "Tomorrow morning, we'll be transferring flower that was grown in our own facility."

Echoing Rositano, Snyder said that he and the 253 Farmacy staff have been well-prepared to adapt to the extensive COVID-19 procedures, partially because the cannabis industry is already used to meticulous regulations.

"Even before all this, on an operational side, cannabis was really treated like a food product," he said. "Everything is already being disinfected and sanitized all the time. We wear gloves and hairnets - it was all very clean. Now we're just doing a bit extra."