



Faith Communities Guidance Document 2
Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
Office of the Governor
VEST Health Equity Work Group

April 10, 2020

Overarching Guidance for Religious Gatherings/Observances/Worship
Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
VEST Unified Command Health Equity Work Group

In response to Governor Northam's [Executive Order 53](#), there was an outpouring of questions specifically relating to bans on all gatherings of more than 10 people with respect to religious events and/or holidays. In furtherance of Executive Order 53, the Governor announced [Executive Order 55](#), which further directed all individuals in Virginia to stay at home, except in extremely limited circumstances. EO 55 is in effect until June 10, 2020.

The purpose of the order is to establish social distancing which will result in a decrease in community spread of COVID-19. It is known and understood that this limitation will disrupt a number of the cultural norms in how religious organizations have traditionally gathered. However, data suggest that the only way to combat the effect of this virus is to fight the spread.

In times like these, Virginians must be creative in how they choose to worship and endeavor to stay connected to their religious groups. For example, many organizations have turned to online LIVE streaming methods, the hosting of services outdoors where individuals remain in their cars, as well as pre-recorded messages uploaded for congregants.

Please refer to the following [FAQ](#) for further answers to commonly asked questions.

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Questions regarding Faith-based Organizations as Service Entities

- 1) Are local faith-based food pantries and soup kitchens allowed to continue serving the community, and, if so, are they exempt from the 10-person limit to public gatherings?**

Yes. Both EO 53 and 55 state that nothing in the Orders “shall limit access to essential services for low-income residents, such as food banks.” Organizations that wish to continue serving the community during this time may continue to do so but should adhere to social distancing recommendations and implement enhanced sanitizing. Additional recommendations to help keep a facility safe and clean can be found [here](#).

Tips to keep in mind:

- Food pantries and feeding programs should avoid distribution of food or other household essentials in settings where people might gather in a group or crowd.*
- Consider options such as “grab-and-go” bags or delivery.*
- Any extra volunteers at feeding programs may begin providing delivery of food or supplies to the elderly or people experiencing homelessness, for example.*

- 2) May organizations that serve persons experiencing homelessness or unsheltered people remain open and continue to assist vulnerable communities?**

Yes, these organizations may continue to operate and assist vulnerable Virginians. However, to the extent possible, social distancing between persons within a shelter is strongly recommended. The Virginia Department of Health and the Department of Housing and Community Development have developed a guidance for homeless shelters, which can be found [here](#). Additional interim guidance from the Centers for Disease Control on how to protect people experiencing homelessness can be found [here](#). Governor Northam described the steps the administration is taking to protect those experiencing homelessness and provided emergency [funding](#) to shelter this especially at-risk and vulnerable population during this health crisis.



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3) Are faith-based preschools permitted to continue providing childcare?

Yes. Any existing childcare provider, including a faith-based preschool, is permitted to offer childcare to families, and should prioritize services to children of essential personnel. On March 18, the Commissioner of VDSS issued a [letter](#) with guidance for childcare providers operating in the Commonwealth. There is an additional FAQ document available [here](#).

*If you are a childcare provider that is continuing to operate to serve essential personnel, **registration with Child Care Aware of Virginia is required**. Please update your operating status online at <https://vachildcare.com/> or contact 866-KIDS-TLC. Please also notify your licensing inspector.*

Virginia is currently focused on supporting children and families on our childcare subsidy program. We have increased absence days, eliminated the initial face-to-face meetings, and provided additional flexibility. Faith-based programs are encouraged to participate. Virginia is also looking at new federal resources and determining how they can be used to support those serving essential personnel.



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Questions regarding How “Social Distancing Works” in a Worship Context & Guidance on Ban of Public Gatherings of 10 or more

- 1) Are religious services conducted outdoors acceptable if we comply with social distancing recommendations? Are drive-in services compliant and/or preferred?**

Yes, under certain social distancing conditions. The hosting of services outdoors where individuals remain in their parked vehicles with adequate social distancing is permissible, as long as everyone remains in their vehicle. Any gathering for a drive in/through worship service where faith leaders assemble on a stage or in the front of the parked vehicles must be limited to no more than 10 people. Please adhere to local municipal noise ordinances if this is a consideration. However, as a result of the risk involved to public health, faith communities are strongly encouraged to conduct all services using electronic or virtual communication, to include incorporating on-line or mail-in donations, video streaming of faith leaders and congregants from home, weekly meetings held using video or telephone remote conferencing, and strict adherence to appropriate social distancing for those faith communities who are serving as sites for care of the public during the pandemic.

You can click [here](#) to receive specific alternatives from the Virginia Department of Health for virtual or home celebration options for Passover, Easter, Jumu'a, and Ramadan.

- 2) How do these executive orders affect faith community offices during the weekdays? Can faith leaders and/or worship teams gather to live-stream so long as they comply with the social-distancing recommendations?**

Yes. All offices may remain open any day of the week. Staff may continue with operations of their organization so long as no more than 10 people are present and they practice safe distancing and coughing and sneezing hygiene to avoid community spread of COVID19.

- 3) In the context of a worship service, is the maximum of 10 people inclusive of parishioners, clergy, choir, and/or other staff?**

Yes. Executive Order 53 and 55 “bans all gatherings of more than 10 people” this is inclusive of any and all staff.



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4) Can programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) continue to meet in our building if the group is smaller than 10?

Yes. As long as the organization is in compliance with the Executive Orders' ban of all gatherings of no more than 10 people. These groups should continue to adhere to social distancing recommendations and use enhanced sanitizing practices.

5) When will the Stay at Home order end?

Executive Order 55 went into effect on March 30, 2020 and will remain in effect until June 10, 2020, unless amended or rescinded by further executive order.

6) If individuals or small groups wish to come to pray, may places of worship remain open for them?

Yes. Both Executive Order 53 and 55 permit gatherings of no more than 10 s and EO 55, Section 1-f allows for "travel to a place of worship." However, it is important to maintain safe social distancing between individuals and ensure proper disinfecting of surfaces and commonly used areas, should this be a consideration. Additional recommendations to help keep a facility safe and clean can be found [here](#).



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Questions regarding Funerals Services

- 1) Is there an exception to the ban on no more than 10 people for funerals? How does this impact graveside services?**

No. There is not an exception for the ban on no more than 10 people for funerals. Regardless of location, whether indoors or graveside, gatherings must be limited to 10 including family, clergy, funeral staff, etc.

We acknowledge that this public health crisis creates great challenges for those families mourning the loss of a loved one and those who support those families, such as faith leaders and funeral homes. Given the wide variety in burial rituals across all the religious beliefs, we must underscore the need to protect public health. Therefore, consider alternatives for burial preparation that might include substitute ceremonial bathing rituals, funeral and graveside services that comply with the no more than 10 person mandate but include alternative forms of participation, such as online video streaming or participation where only 10 people at a time pay their respects in a rotating fashion.

- 2) Are there currently any directives for the preparation and burial of casualties of the pandemic or general guidance for funeral home staff?**

Yes. The Commonwealth of Virginia has provided directives for the preparation and burial of casualties of the pandemic on the Department of Health Professions website. Guidance regarding the handling of decedents who may have been exposed to the COVID-19 virus can be found [here](#). Additional guidance from the CDC can be found [here](#).

- 3) Are there specific guidelines for military funerals and burial?**

No. Neither the CDC nor the Commonwealth of Virginia have issued specific guidance for military funerals and burial. Please follow the guidelines for civilian funerals.



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Questions regarding Financial Resources

- 1) My place of worship employs several people who are now out of a job because we have had to close our doors. Are our staff eligible for unemployment benefits?**

Yes. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, many people have suffered unexpected job loss. As of Monday April 6, 2020, those who have suffered job loss from a place of worship are now officially eligible for unemployment benefits. Governor Northam has asked that everyone apply for unemployment benefits, who have become unemployed due to this crisis. Applications in English and in Spanish can be found [here](#).

- 2) My place of worship will not survive the economic crisis the COVID-19 crisis has created. Is there financial help available for faith leaders?**

Yes. On March 20, 2020, the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) approved an SBA disaster declaration for the Commonwealth of Virginia. The disaster declaration allows SBA to provide assistance to Virginia businesses and nonprofits negatively impacted by COVID-19. For more information on disaster assistance, visit the SBA website [here](#). To apply for loans with the Paycheck Protection Program, click [here](#).



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Additional Resources

- 1) The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) has issued guidance related to COVID-19 and Funerals on its website, which can be found [here](#).
- 2) Further information from the National Funeral Directors Association can be found [here](#).
- 3) The Virginia Department of Health Professions has published a “Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers Frequently Asked Questions related to COVID-19”. It can be found [here](#). Any additional questions can be emailed to fanbd@dhp.virginia.gov.
- 4) The Virginia Department of Health Medical Examiner's Office has published “Information for Funeral Directors” which can be found [here](#).
- 5) For further questions on financial resources available to faith-based organizations, contact the Virginia Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity [here](#).
- 6) For any additional questions or concerns, feel free to reach out to one of Virginia’s four district Medical Examiner’s office. Contact information for local offices can be found [here](#).