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Shelter in Place Should be a Last-Ditch Resort: North Carolina Must Instead Draw on Decades of Experience

While some states have taken the drastic step of resorting to shelter-in-place orders endeavoring to control the spread of COVID-19, North Carolina's practiced response to natural disasters and disciplined emergency management has us well positioned to avoid a total shutdown in the near term. Undoubtedly, public health and safety sits prominently as our lodestar, but tripping the main breaker can only be a last resort – this position of the NC Chamber and the business community has been communicated to Governor Roy Cooper.

North Carolinians should feel confident in the steady hands steering our state's response to COVID-19. North Carolina Director of Emergency Management, Mike Sprayberry, manages our state's preparation for, response to, recovery from and mitigation of natural and man-made disasters. His experience positions him well for the role. A military veteran with 25 years of service split between the U.S. Marine Corps and N.C. Army National Guard, Director Sprayberry joined North Carolina Emergency Management in 2005 as the Deputy Director and Logistics Section Chief. His expertise and proven ability to lead through crises has won the confidence of both Republican and Democratic governors.

In navigating this public health crisis, Director Sprayberry is joined by Dr. Mandy Cohen, North Carolina's capable and experienced Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Dr. Betsy Tilson, our imminently qualified State Health Director. Secretary Cohen is a physician trained in internal medicine and has vast experience leading complex health organizations, and Dr. Tilson completed both a pediatric residency and a general preventive medicine/public health residency, and is board certified in both fields.

With these leaders at the helm, North Carolinians can feel secure knowing our state's COVID-19 response is in competent and thoughtful hands. Between them, they can draw upon decades of lessons and best practices that come from the consistent experience of managing natural disaster response plans for our state.

Governor Roy Cooper has also shown steady leadership in managing our state's response to COVID-19. As a member of the Governor's Novel Coronavirus Task Force, I can personally attest to this leadership. Throughout this crisis, Governor Cooper and his team have made a deliberate effort to engage and listen to the business community. We have communicated our position that a complete shutdown would have a devastating impact. They are committed to not acting for the sake of acting, but rather taking a disciplined approach to doing what is in the best interest of the health, safety and welfare of all North Carolinians – now and in the long term.

North Carolina's legislative leadership has signaled it is also ready to act, when the time is right. Their prudent management of our state's finances has created a savings reserve that positions us well for crisis response. While aid typically begins at the federal level, our state's legislative leaders are practiced and ready to ensure North Carolina has what is needed to not only rise from this challenge, but be positioned to grow and thrive. Capable leaders at our Council of State agencies have also been sharpened for days such as these. We can be proud of the cooperative spirit on display.

It is not just state government that is poised to act. North Carolina's private sector, too, has developed expertise through managing and responding to the same challenges as our public officials. In recent decades as powerful storms ravaged communities across our state, businesses have honed their emergency response plans and fine-tuned their strategies to protect employees and keep operations running.

North Carolina's economy is based on an array of essential industries. Manufacturers in our state are producing goods that we need in our daily lives, as well as resources that are integral to our nation's response to COVID-19. The agriculture sector must remain in operation to feed not only our state, but families all across the nation. Our protein processing plant capacity rivals any other area in the United States, with largest-in-class manufacturers including Butterball, Smithfield Foods, Mountaire Farms, and Rose Acre Farms. Maintaining infrastructure is imperative, not only to deliver food, medicine and supplies, but also to assure the readiness of our military/defense, water/sewer, and responses to natural disasters – we are only months away from hurricane season.

Remember too, we are home to world-class innovators in the life science and biotech industries, whose contributions make North Carolina a national and global leader in researching and developing new technologies. Our utilities have earned the reputation of being an afterthought, a credit to their consistently reliable service and extraordinary experience. From health care to manufacturing, our state's employers could be instrumental in solving the very problem at hand. We cannot afford to bring all that effort to a screeching halt.

The disruption a shelter-in-place order would generate for the private sector, and for North Carolina citizens whose financial well-being and overall welfare depends on their ability to work, cannot be underestimated. It would fashion a massive disturbance that could create the opposite of its intended effect by interfering with the very economic activity that is protecting our state and its citizenry from disaster. This concern has been shared with Governor Cooper and his team.

While times of crisis are by nature uncertain, North Carolina must continue to do what it does best: remain calm and act with a smart and disciplined approach. A true North Carolina approach. Acting on decades of experience and avoiding a shelter-in-place will position us to rise from this crisis and begin to rebuild once it has passed. And it will.

North Carolinians are resilient. We are accustomed to preparing for uncertainty and weathering the storms it sometimes brings. With a well-reasoned plan and seasoned guidance, we will weather this storm.

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