



## **Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago**

### **Framework for Reopening Illinois Places of Worship**

#### **A Time of Uncertainty and Hope**

Communities of faith gather for worship, celebration, consolation, instruction, and renewal. Local congregations—churches, gurdwaras, meditation halls, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other institutions—deliver many vital services to people in their communities. They offer guidance and hope for millions of people in our state.

The shuttering of houses of worship in response to COVID-19 is unprecedented, and the pandemic has disrupted every aspect of congregational life. Thousands of congregations statewide have suspended worship services, in-person study and devotional opportunities, pastoral care, and even life cycle events. Their ability to clothe, feed, educate, and counsel the people of their communities has been severely curtailed or cancelled. Many face severe financial stress.

Faith communities made these difficult decisions because of their most fundamental teachings: the preservation of life, and the commitment to love and compassion for their neighbors. Yet these sacrifices have created a profound sense of loss among members and threatened the survival of congregations.

Illinoisans of every faith are anxious to return to their congregations and to renew themselves and their work on behalf of the common good. Reopening a congregation is the fullest expression of hope. Yet reopening without careful planning can prove literally disastrous. Tragically, congregations have reopened for worship only to see their members infected. The risk is very real and will not be eliminated until a cure for COVID-19 is found.

Every faith community teaches the importance of looking after the welfare of other people, be they family, neighbors, or strangers. Special concern for the most vulnerable—the poor, the weak, the sick, the elderly, and the marginalized—is central to every religious tradition.

The pandemic has highlighted that our actions have consequences for other people beside ourselves. What each congregation does will affect both its members and the community at large. Every decision to reopen must be made in light of this knowledge.

## A Framework for Reopening Illinois Places of Worship

The **Framework for Reopening Illinois Places of Worship** is an outline prepared by the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago. It reflects the experience and wisdom of our interfaith community. Many member institutions of the Council have already prepared specific guidelines/plans for reopening their places of worship. These are listed by the Council at <https://www.crlmc.org/covid19reopening.html>. Congregations are urged to consult with leaders in their own traditions and denominations for specific instructions.

Reopening a house of worship should be the culmination of much preparation and many decisions. The **Framework for Reopening Illinois Places of Worship** offers general guidelines for that process and is presented in two parts: Preparation and Reopening.

- **Part 1: Preparation**

This section outlines basic issues each congregation must consider before reopening a facility for members and the general community. It also outlines specific steps for congregations to take in three essential areas: Planning; Communication & Education; and Training & Practice.

- **Part 2: Reopening**

This section offers a checklist of practices that congregations should follow upon reopening to protect the health of their members and the general public.

The people of Illinois will persevere in returning our state to normal life. The **Framework for Reopening Illinois Places of Worship** illustrates how working together can aid each of us and provide benefits for us all.

### PART 1: PREPARATION

The process of reopening an institution after a period of disuse is difficult under any circumstances. It is particularly challenging when reopening requires changes in building usage, long standing traditions, and congregational customs.

Whenever a congregation decides to reopen, **now is the time to prepare**. The decision requires careful planning, communication, education, training, and practice.

#### Planning

##### *Form a Team*

Every congregation is encouraged to create a working group or task force to coordinate the reopening effort. This group can include clergy; lay leadership; key stakeholders; medical professionals; and other congregants with relevant skills. The task force should coordinate planning for reopening and therefore should be small enough to work effectively. The task force may also choose to create sub-groups devoted to specific topics or activities, such as worship, school, community services, maintenance, security, and the like. A congregation can vest final decision making authority in the task force or have the task force make recommendations to its regular governing body.

### ***Make a Plan***

Every congregation should develop a comprehensive plan to reopen the building. The plan will help everyone determine what the goals are for every aspect of congregational life and what are the best means to reach those goals. The development of a successful plan requires two elements: 1) involvement of members of the congregation, and 2) alignment with public health directives.

### ***Involve the Congregation***

The successful reopening of a congregation will require the participation and cooperation of members. Congregants are eager to know when the institution will reopen and how they can help rebuild. Real opportunities for engagement will increase congregational approval for whatever plan is developed and create a process for addressing the normal disagreements that arise during such an extraordinary project.

### ***Listen to the Government***

This Framework is aligned with [Restore Illinois](#), the five-phase plan set forth by Governor Pritzker for reopening of all businesses in the state, Restore Illinois defines religious services as “essential gatherings” which are still limited in the number of persons who can be together.

On May 28, the Illinois Department of Public Health issued “COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services,” which allows places of worship to limit attendance to 25% of building capacity or a maximum of 100 attendees, whichever is lower.

Good policy is for each congregation to check regularly with local and state authorities to keep abreast of the latest developments. Current information is available from the Illinois Department of Public Health at <https://www.dph.illinois.gov/covid19>.

## **Communication & Education**

### ***Stay in Touch***

Maintain regular communication with the congregation about the reopening process. Whether by e-newsletter, website notifications, Facebook, or phone trees, regular communication will help mitigate rumors and “grapevine news.” Congregations also can dedicate part of those communications to updates and resources about COVID-19.

### ***Be Honest and Accurate***

One of a congregation’s greatest resources is the trust of its members. Candid communication increases that credibility. Congregants will forgive the delays and complications that can arise during the reopening process if that information is presented transparently. Candid discussions of challenges may also lead to congregants sharing unexpected resources and skills to address problems.

### ***Answer the Key Questions***

Congregants will be anxious before they return. A key part of educating the congregation will be addressing basic questions. The answers will help ease their anxiety and encourage their input in the reopening process. Such basic questions include:

- What will happen? What will be different?
- What protective measures will be necessary?
- How safe is the worship service?
- What about restrooms? Coffee hour? Common areas?
- Where can congregants move in the building? How do they enter and exit?

### ***Explain Change***

The congregation needs to know not only what has changed but also why certain customs and habits need to be different when the building reopens. Simple, concise explanations can help congregants understand what has changed and how long that change will be in effect.

### ***Hold Difficult Conversations***

COVID-19 is particularly aggressive with persons who have an underlying medical condition or who are over 65. What protections are required for these vulnerable populations? What restrictions should be put in place? Who will make these decisions? These questions are best discussed before the building is reopened.

### ***Acknowledge Mourning and Loss***

Religious traditions are built to endure, and some have been handed down for millennia. Many sacred practices and customs, however, cannot be practiced until COVID-19 is no longer a threat. This is a disjunctive loss, and it must be honored as such. A congregation needs to give members the time and opportunity to mourn before they are ready to move forward, reopen, and rebuild.

### ***Training & Practice***

Much of the challenge facing congregations has been likened to passengers building the plane while it is still in flight. These steps are useful in the successful implementation and adjustment of an untried plan.

### ***Train Staff and Volunteers***

The success of any reopening plan will depend on the people who implement it. Congregations need to train staff and volunteers in the components and procedures for reopening. Innovative planning may be required in order to protect vulnerable staff. New recruitment may be necessary if traditional volunteer networks are comprised of disproportionately older congregants.

### ***Simulate Responses to Problem Scenarios***

What does the congregation do if a congregant shows symptoms of COVID-19? if the number of congregants exceeds the legal limit? If someone requires medical attention? If clergy, staff, or volunteers fall sick? Anticipating problem scenarios, and working through how to respond, is one of the best ways to prepare for them.

### ***Walk through the plan***

Once the plan and staffing are complete, every congregation should walk through the reopening. When the building reopens, there will be no time to learn roles or assignments. There is no substitute for practice.

### ***Accept Changes***

No plan is perfect, and changes even to well-conceived plans are inevitable. Successful plans will include an acknowledgement that procedures may evolve over time and an invitation to the congregation for help with improving them. Congregations will benefit from having a process for soliciting feedback, receiving and processing suggestions, and implementing changes and improvements.

## **PART 2: REOPENING**

### **Best Practices for Congregations**

- Universal use of cloth face mask and handwashing
- Spatial distancing (6-foot minimum) in seating plan
- Spatial distancing (6-foot minimum) preserved in hallways, common areas, entrances/exits, and on grounds
- Procedures and personnel for intensive cleaning after every gathering
- Restroom policy
- No physical contact
- No sharing of worship aids, collection trays, books, or food service
- No in-person choral singing
- Individual singers with spatial distancing (significantly greater than six feet)
- Procedures and personnel for limiting attendance at gatherings
- Clear signage throughout the building that outlines essential practices
- Cleaning procedures for all spaces before and after each gathering

### **Recommended Practices for Congregations**

- Provide virtual services if possible

### **Regular Practices for the Duration of the Pandemic**

Every hospital has a clear protocol for the operating room. Used materials are removed, equipment is replaced, and all surfaces are thoroughly cleaned before and after each surgery. The procedure is followed for every surgery in order to protect the health of every patient.

Reopening a congregation for gatherings will require similar dedication. There can be no shortcuts with COVID-19. **The procedures for maintaining the safety of congregants must be followed for each and every gathering.** The integrity and vitality of congregations and the communities they serve depend on faithful adherence to safety protocols.

## NEXT STEPS

The Council hopes that this **Framework for Reopening Illinois Places of Worship** is useful to your community. For questions about the Framework, contact:

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**Council of Religious Leaders  
of Metropolitan Chicago**

The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, a non-profit organization, is comprised of the head religious leadership of practically every major religious tradition in the broader Chicago area, representing nearly six million people. Through its activities, The Council speaks with a unified moral voice on issues of the day; creates a climate of better interfaith understanding and cooperation; and works to advance the common good. For more information, visit [www.crlmc.org](http://www.crlmc.org).

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