

The city sleeps: New York bans big gatherings, museums close

March 12 2020, by Michael Hill, Jennifer Peltz and Jim Mustian



Members of the New York National Guard distribute food to families in New Rochelle, N.Y., Thursday, March 12, 2020. The area has endured a fast-growing COVID-19 cluster. On Tuesday, Gov. Mario Cuomo declared a 1-mile radius "containment area" in the New York suburb. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

Museums prepared to shut their doors, the opera was silenced, lights

dimmed on Broadway, big gatherings were banned and the subway was shunned as the largest city in the United States wound down Thursday amid a rise in coronavirus cases.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced that gatherings with more than 500 people will temporarily be banned in New York state, one of several "dramatic actions" to contain the new virus.

The governor said the ban would start for most places statewide at 5 p.m. Friday, though he said it does not apply to schools, hospitals, nursing homes and mass transit. Cuomo said it would be "tremendously disruptive" to close schools en masse.

The ban for Broadway theaters starts 5 p.m. Thursday and is in effect through April 12, according to a statement from The Broadway League, an organization of theater owners and producers.

"As soon as we can go back to normal we'll go back to normal," Cuomo said. "But we are still ascending, we are still on the upward trajectory of this disease."

Cuomo said the city has 95 confirmed COVID-19 cases as of Thursday afternoon. There are more than 320 cases statewide, with the largest cluster in the suburb of New Rochelle north of New York City.

The ban comes as some of New York City's most esteemed cultural institutions announced Thursday they are temporarily shutting down because of the coronavirus, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Opera and Carnegie Hall.



A woman and child wear masks as they walk down the streets on Thursday, March 12, 2020, in the Brooklyn borough of New York. Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days. The vast majority of people recover from the new coronavirus. According to the World Health Organization, most people recover in about two to six weeks, depending on the severity of the illness. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

"The Met's priority is to protect and support our staff, volunteers, and visitors," Daniel Weiss, the museum's president and chief executive, said in a statement. The museum will close its three locations starting Friday. No date for reopening was given.

The opera company said all performances have been canceled through

March 31. Carnegie Hall also announced it was closing its doors at midnight Thursday for all public events through the end of March.

The cascade of closings left some tourists shaking their heads in disbelief. Ken and Theresa Winter, visiting from Colorado, headed to Broadway on Thursday after the Big East basketball tournament was hastily scrapped.

Theresa Winter said the reaction to the coronavirus reminded her of the uncertain days following the Sept. 11 attacks. She noted their plane to New York City was less than half full.



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"containment area" in the New York suburb. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

"Hopefully we can get back to Denver," she said.

The closings come amid signs that New Yorkers are acting on their own to avoid crowds. Ridership on the subway and commuter rail lines has plunged, state officials said.

Cuomo announced late Wednesday that New York City's St. Patrick's Day Parade would be postponed for the first time in its 258-year history. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio later tweeted that the parade will take place at some future date "whether it's in the heat of summer or on a clear fall day."

The virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms such as fever and cough for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, and death.

The vast majority of people recover. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover.



Pedestrian uses her phone while wearing a face mask in Herald Square, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days, but he hopes to avoid closing all public events such as Broadway shows. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

The Archdiocese of New York said it will close elementary schools in its system Monday for at least a week.

De Blasio said in a statement that two public schools that share a building in the Bronx will close for 24 hours because a student tested positive for COVID-19.

But the mayor said he hopes to avoid drastic measures, such as shutting the city's entire public school system or its subways.

"I'm a believer that we have to be careful not to destroy people's livelihoods, not to destroy the opportunity for our kids to be in a safe place learning every day in school," he said in a Thursday morning appearance on CNN. "And yet we're going to have to introduce more and more restrictions, which we're certainly going to be doing in New York City today and tomorrow."

North of the city in hard-hit New Rochelle, camouflage-clad National Guard troops helped distribute food to residents Thursday.



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COVID-19 cluster. On Tuesday, Gov. Mario Cuomo declared a 1-mile radius "containment area" in the New York suburb. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)



Shoppers wear face masks and sanitize their hands on the sidewalk at Herald Square, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York, N.Y. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days, but he hopes to avoid closing all public events such as Broadway shows. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)



A commuter wears a face mask while riding the a nearly empty subway car into Brooklyn, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days, but he hopes to avoid closing all public events such as Broadway shows. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

State officials this week set up a "containment area" in the suburb in which schools and houses of worship are closed within a mile radius of a point near a synagogue associated with the cluster. People who aren't personally quarantined will be able to leave their homes and go to work or elsewhere. Businesses can remain open, and residents or visitors are free to walk around.

The Cuomo administration did not say how many troops were mobilized.

Though cases were concentrated in the New York City area, confirmations were reported in new parts of the state. Officials in Rochester said the first known case in western New York involved a man who had visited Italy. The University at Albany suspended classes Thursday after a student tested positive for COVID-19, one of two new cases in the county.

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