

NYC takes 'biggest step' in reopening after virus crisis

June 22 2020, by Jennifer Peltz



Workers prepare for the reopening of the Macy's Herald Square location Friday, June 19, 2020, in New York. New York City hits a key point Monday in trying to rebound from the nation's deadliest coronavirus outbreak. For the first time in three months, New Yorkers will be able to dine out, though only at outdoor tables. Shoppers can once again browse in the city's destination stores. Shaggy heads can get haircuts. Cooped-up kids can finally climb playground monkey bars instead of apartment walls. Office workers can return to their desks, though many won't yet. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

New York City ventured into a crucial stage of reopening as stores let people in Monday, offices brought workers back, restaurants seated customers outdoors and residents both welcomed and worried about rebounding from the nation's deadliest coronavirus outbreak.

From Macy's "Miracle on 34th Street" store to the World Trade Center's office towers, the city was getting back to business, though with new virus-safety measures after a three-month shutdown.

Larry Silverstein, for one, couldn't wait.

The 89-year-old World Trade Center developer was eager to return to his office there as Silverstein Properties staffers started coming back on staggered schedules Monday. Employees have to wear masks in the 7 World Trade Center lobby, and footprints mark where to stand in elevators now limited to about a quarter their usual capacity.

To Silverstein, returning to office life and in-person teamwork brings "a joy, a fulfillment, such a sense of being able to function." He doesn't buy into arguments that the pandemic bodes poorly for office work or New York City.

"I went through 9/11. I remember people telling me we were never going to be able to get people to come back to lower Manhattan," said Silverstein, who leased the twin towers six weeks before the 2001 terror attacks destroyed them. "Never bet against New York, because New York always comes back, bigger and better than ever before."



Pedestrians pass the online order pickup area at the Macy's Herald Square location Friday, June 19, 2020, in New York. New York City hits a key point Monday in trying to rebound from the nation's deadliest coronavirus outbreak. For the first time in three months, New Yorkers will be able to dine out, though only at outdoor tables. Shoppers can once again browse in the city's destination stores. Shaggy heads can get haircuts. Cooped-up kids can finally climb playground monkey bars instead of apartment walls. Office workers can return to their desks, though many won't yet. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

At Macy's famous flagship store, Tammi Marilus was in line when doors opened at 11 a.m.

Shoppers have to wear masks. Workers must undergo temperature checks. Makeup testing is temporarily banned, and clothes left in fitting

rooms won't go back on the rack for 24 hours.

Still, with the store reopening, "it feels like it's coming back to normal, even though we all know it isn't over yet," said Marilus, 42, who brought hand sanitizer with her and was pleased to see workers disinfecting counters.

"We have to live our lives. We have to take risks," said Marilus.

But some New Yorkers are apprehensive.

Alex Michaels may return soon to a retail job. He agrees it's important to revive the economy, but he worries about potential coronavirus exposure from working with the public, even with new safety measures.



Workers test social distancing at the Macy's Herald Square location Friday, June 19, 2020, in New York. New York City hits a key point Monday in trying to rebound from the nation's deadliest coronavirus outbreak. For the first time in three months, New Yorkers will be able to dine out, though only at outdoor tables. Shoppers can once again browse in the city's destination stores. Shaggy heads can get haircuts. Cooped-up kids can finally climb playground monkey bars instead of apartment walls. Office workers can return to their desks, though many won't yet. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

"Something's got to give. I get that," said Michaels, 30, but there could be "a high price to pay."

Eve Gonzalez, who's not yet back at her food-industry job, feels it's too soon to relax restrictions.

"I'm dying to go out, but people's health is more important," said Gonzalez, 27.

The virus has been blamed for over 22,000 New York City deaths, with the toll down to single and low double digits in recent days. Infections have plummeted from an early-April peak, but an average of about 250 people a day still have tested positive over the past two weeks, city reopening began with construction, curbside-pickup retail, wholesaling and manufacturing.

For the first time in three months, too, shaggy heads can get salon haircuts, and cooped-up kids can climb playground monkey bars instead of apartment walls.



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Monday marked just the second of four reopening phases, but Mayor Bill de Blasio called it "the biggest step." The Democratic mayor said he and wife Chirlane McCray planned to mark the occasion by dining out.

Jerome and Susan Barnett beat them to it, lunching Monday at a

Manhattan pub. They hope others will do so for the sake of restaurant workers' livelihoods.

"We're going to be an empty city if we don't have people," Susan Barnett said.

After three months of struggling to get by on takeout and delivery, Melba Wilson is exuberant about introducing appropriately spaced sidewalk tables outside Melba's, her Harlem restaurant.

"This is definitely the infusion that we so greatly needed. ... It's been very grim," and not just financially, said Wilson, president of the NYC Hospitality Alliance, an industry group. "We talk about being physically distant, which is important, but being socially active is important, as well."



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Meanwhile, some shuttered offices reopened in business districts that became virtual ghost towns this spring. Lawyer Greg Nespole went in to work near Wall Street feeling it was "about time to return to normalcy."

"You don't really feel like a lawyer practicing in your kid's bedroom," Nespole said. But with many nearby offices and eateries still closed, he said he was likely to work at home the rest of the week.

Some of the city's biggest corporate employers are sticking with largely remote work for now.

Only about 5% of Citi's 13,300 New York City employees are expected back at the bank's offices on July 1. JPMorgan Chase hasn't set a date yet for returning to its New York offices; Wells Fargo's time frame is July 31 or later. Pharmaceutical company Pfizer is extending remote working at least until the as-yet-undetermined date for city's next reopening phase.

With work-from-home arrangements now established and employees concerned about offices, public-transit commutes and child care, many white-collar companies are "moving with caution and safety," says

Bhushan Sethi, a PwC partner specializing in workplace strategies. The consulting and accounting firm isn't yet reopening its own New York office.



In this May 28, 2020, file photo, patrons enjoy drinks while standing at tables placed outside restaurants in New York. New York City hits a key point Monday in trying to rebound from the nation's deadliest coronavirus outbreak. For the first time in three months, New Yorkers will be able to dine out, though only at outdoor tables. Shoppers can once again browse in the city's destination stores. Shaggy heads can get haircuts. Cooped-up kids can finally climb playground monkey bars instead of apartment walls. Office workers can return to their desks, though many won't yet. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

As New York reopens, retail worker William Rodgers is figuring out his next steps.

The last three months have not been easy, but "a lot of us have gotten time to reflect on our own lives," said Rodgers, 29. "That's one blessing."

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