

Services inside Houses of Worship

REOPENING GUIDANCE – June 1, 2020

This guidance is based on current information known about the COVID-19. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Anne Arundel County Department of Health (AACDOH) will provide updated guidance as needed and as additional information becomes available. Please continue to check the [CDC website](#) and the AACDOH website aahealth.org/covid19 routinely for updated guidance.

This guidance is intended for all houses of worship in Anne Arundel County no matter what denomination as allowed by County Executive Order 23, based on meeting social distancing, large gatherings and face mask requirements. These requirements will stay in effect until further notice.

Effective June 5, 2020 at 5:00 p.m., all houses of worship in Anne Arundel County may hold services inside the house of worship and operate under the following circumstances:

PROTECTING YOU AND YOUR CONGREGATION

- In this early stage of recovery, the Department recommends religious services be virtual or on parking lots with the congregation in their vehicles during the services.
- For indoor religious services, including worship, weddings and funerals, seating shall be arranged or utilized in a manner to maximize social distancing:
 - Seating shall be at least six feet apart for individual worshipers or families from the same households.
 - Markings on seats are required to show six feet distance and signage is required to close appropriate rows of seating. Faith leaders know their congregation very well, and they know what family members may sit as a group of no more than six feet.
 - Every other row of seating shall be left vacant to provide a 6-foot separation between rows.
- Due to the structural design of some houses of worship, it is difficult to determine a maximum number based on square footage. There may be large open areas that do not include seating; therefore, square footage should not be the determining factor. Maximum capacity may not exceed 50% of the facility's maximum occupancy, and appropriate capacity could be less, based on seating arrangement and required social distancing.
- Houses of worship shall utilize one entrance for the congregation to arrive; in larger houses of worships there should be a separate single exit, but it should not block any existing required exits. Consider having an usher open the door wearing gloves for congregants as they arrive to limit hand contact whenever possible.
- Encourage congregants to exit the house of worship once services have ended. Excuse rows of seating one row at a time to leave ample space for congregants to exit safely using social distancing protocols.
- The Department recommends houses of worship keep any water or oil receptacles, which are used for religious ceremonies or rituals, empty at this time.
- Baptisms are not recommended at this time.
- At this time, communion is not recommended unless it can be given in a way that does not involve removing face coverings within 6 feet of others.
- Common items such as bulletins, pens, pencils, hymnals and holy books may not be shared at this time. If a microphone is used for services, it shall be disinfected in between speakers.
- The Department recommends that choirs not be active at this time. Singing in a house of worship is not recommended.
- While worshipping in a house of worship, all congregants shall continue to practice social distancing and maintain 6-foot distance from others. The leadership of the houses of worship is responsible for enforcing this rule.
- Face masks covering both the mouth and nose shall be worn at all times by congregants, employees and volunteers in accordance with Executive Order of The Governor No. 20-04-15-01, dated April 15, 2020. The leadership of the houses of worship is responsible for enforcing this rule. The individual providing the sermon may take off the face covering as long as there is a 6-foot separation from all other individuals. Individuals who have medical conditions affected by wearing a face covering are not required to wear a face covering. The Department recommends not to engage in the following activities: handshaking, hugging, high fives, fist bumps or the fellowship greeting. Hand touching of any kind is not recommended. Congregants, employees and volunteers shall continue to practice good hand hygiene, and hand sanitizer shall be readily available for anyone in the facility.
- Frequently touched surfaces such as restrooms and door handles shall be disinfected frequently or at least hourly while services are active.
- After each service and at the end of each day services are held, all surfaces that were utilized by the congregation shall be disinfected, such as pews, seating, door handles and restrooms. People conducting this task shall wear disposable gloves when cleaning and disinfecting surfaces. Use of an approved disinfectant is required.

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- Houses of worship should instruct congregants, employees and volunteers to not attend if they are not feeling well. Individuals that are part of a vulnerable population or are immune compromised should worship via virtual services at this time.
- Water fountains with mouth spouts shall be closed, and houses of worship should encourage everyone to bring or use their own water bottles.
- Houses of worship shall ensure HVAC systems are in proper working order and filters are changed on a regular basis.
- Each congregant, employee or volunteer shall exercise personal responsibility to protect others from any risk of infection.

OUTDOOR SERVICE WILL BE CONSIDERED UNDER THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:

- Additional seating may be installed on the premise if the congregation has ownership or permission from ownership to place seating not to exceed 50% of its approved indoor seating.
- All seating shall be spaced six feet apart from each seat, or households may sit together separated by other groups by six feet.
- If indoor restrooms facilities are to be used, points of access to restroom facilities shall be provided.
- Outdoor seating may not be more than 500 feet away from the restrooms.
- Any tent over 200 square feet requires a building permit (Permit Center: Contact 410-222-7700 or email IPMailbox@aacounty.org).
- Any proposed use of electric or plumbing outdoors shall comply with county code requirements.
- Seating areas shall be delineated and separated from any driving areas to protect from vehicles. This can be done with landscape planters, posts, cones, fencing and other barriers.
- If outdoor seating includes the parking lot:
 - ADA accessible spaces may not be used for seating.
 - Traffic flow into and out of the site may not be blocked.
 - Fire lanes for emergency vehicles shall remain unobstructed to maintain adequate clearance to meet Fire Code standards.

Failure to abide by any state or local executive orders regarding public gatherings and other COVID-19 related restrictions will be grounds for the county to revoke authorization of the use of outdoor seating. As previously noted, all county laws that currently apply to a house of worship remain in effect.

This is guidance for services but personal choice may still be to hold services virtually or with parking lot services at this stage in the recovery.

As county residents start to gather and leave their homes, we must all remain diligent in our social distancing, face coverings and washing our hands to make every experience a pleasant and safe one for everyone.

**COVID-19 Health Line – 410-222-7256
or email covid19info@aacounty.org**

Additional Information:

CDC Resources

- [What you need to know about coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions and Answers](#)
- [What to do if you are sick with COVID-19](#)
- [Environmental Cleaning and Disinfection Recommendations](#)
- [Reopening Guidance for Public Spaces, Businesses, Schools and Homes](#)