

COVID-19

Continued from page 1

Also allowed are stores that sell groceries or hardware, organizations that provide charitable and social services, media, gas stations and financial institutions.

Critical trades include plumbers, electricians, exterminators, cleaning and janitorial staff for commercial and governmental properties, security staff, operating engineers, HVAC, painting, moving and relocation services, and other service providers that maintain the safety, sanitation and essential operation of residences, essential activities, and essential businesses and operations.

Mail services, laundry services, and restaurants for consumption off-premises are also deemed essential.

Nonessential businesses and operations must cease, aside from minimum basic operations that include the necessary activities to maintain the value of inventory, preserve plant and equipment condition, ensure security, process payroll and employee benefits and facilitate employees working remotely.

The order also closed licensed child care centers and all childcare homes serving more than six children.

Also closed are fitness and exercise gyms, spas, salons, barber shops, tattoo parlors and similar facilities.

Only essential travel is permitted and must be done in accordance with social distancing requirements.

Protecting workers, public

The concerns, of course, have prompted extraordinary measures be taken to protect the health of workers and customers. Virtually every open business has been wiping down its facilities and offering up hand sanitizer.

Bi-State Development, which among other things runs the region’s largest public transit system, including MetroLink and Metro Bus, has taken extraordinary steps to keep employees and riders safe, according to Taulby Roach, the president and chief executive officer.

“All of our rolling stock is disinfected every single night, using COVID-19, CDC-approved disinfecting agents,” Roach said. An extra midday cleaning is also taking place in all the light rail and bus operations.

On March 23, Bi-State enacted a policy where every single employee goes through a daily screening process before work.

“They are screened in the parking lot before even entering the facility,” Roach said. A temperature scan is being used, and independent contractor nurse’s aides are on hand to check people as well.

Each of the safely screened workers then gets a wristband, with a different color for each day worked.

The agency, like many businesses that remain open, is fighting some absenteeism caused by workers who are having to take off to tend children at home.

Bi-State is not planning layoffs right now, he said, but it has scaled back services. Ridership is going through a 40 percent dip, he said.

Husbands and wives

Everyone has stories of how working couples are adapting. Michael and Baylee LaCoste of Granite City are no exception. She’s a self-employed hair stylist and he is a union boilermaker.

He’s been going to work every day, but she’s been sidelined as nonessential since the governor’s shelter-in-place order went into effect Saturday afternoon, March 21. So, how’s it going?

“It’s going. It’s boring,” she said. “I can’t go back until they lift the stay-at-home order. As soon as they do that, I’ll be in the next day.”

LaCoste works out of the City Buzz salon in Collinsville. She has not been able to work from home.

“I have asthma, so I’m trying to keep myself safe. I haven’t been letting people into my house. I don’t know what you’re bringing to my house. I don’t know what I’d be bringing to your house. For the time being there’s not a whole lot I can do.”

Some of her colleagues in the industry have been venturing out for house calls.

LaCoste said she is not sure she qualifies for unemployment. She called the state line one time and was on hold for an hour before she got aggravated and hung up.

Her husband is just as busy now as he was before, she said.

“He’s been doing a lot of little outage emergencies, going to a bunch of different plants. The hall calls him whenever there’s a job. All the plants he’s going to are taking everybody’s temperature before they can go into the plant. One of his buddies was sent home because his wife is a nurse and she hadn’t been tested, so they are taking precautions. The union has given boilermakers a piece of paper to put in their wallet in case they get pulled over, that shows they are an essential worker allowed to be on the road driving.”

The impact on small business

Addressing a group of restaurateurs in mid-March, Edwardsville Mayor Hal Patton minced no words about the situation. Patton is also a dentist by trade.

“This is an extremely scary situation for public health,” he said. “I think our aggressiveness is probably right. You can have this damage for a short amount of time, or you can have it for a really long amount of it. China took this very aggressively two and a half months ago and they are starting to open back up again.”

The meeting was organized by Matt McSparin, owner of Edison’s entertainment complex in Edwardsville, who this year spent a substantial sum on a new adult venue, a physical addition to his business called The Outlet. He barely had it opened when he had to close it because of the state order.

“The revenue we’re missing right now is never going to come back,” he said. “It’s not like I’m going to have double or triple the size May or June.”

Those attending had numerous questions about state guidelines on tax filings and related issues. Clarifications are coming out almost daily at the state level. The state is now offering small-business loans, but some see that as adding another layer of debt, he said.

“We’re paying attention every day to our news feeds to see what changes and with those changes we have to zig and zag and adjust to how we’re going to have to operate our business,” McSparin said. “Three days ago, we were in a meeting as to how we were going to keep things to 50 people or less. Three hours later, multiple things had changed.”

Churches

Most churches are closed, but many are conducting virtual services, through Facebook Live and other means.

Bishop Thomas Paprocki, head of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield, which includes most of the Catholic churches in Metro East outside of the Belleville area, acknowledged the difficulty of conducting services with no parishioners present.

“We in the church are sometimes torn between the desires to protect the public and at the same time practice the faith,” he said in a video on March 18 announcing the start of live-streamed Masses. “We’re essentially making a Lenten sacrifice here. When the day comes, when we’re able to resume our normal celebration of the Masses, we’ll be able to appreciate this (even more).”

Funerals and weddings

Joe Kalmer, a longtime area mortician

who runs Kalmer Memorial Services in Lebanon, said he’s getting regular updates from his industry but hopes for a quick end to the crisis.

“Obviously, the coronavirus has affected us in the funeral business. Not only from a public gathering issue, but a health hazardous issue as well. We are receiving constant updates from the National Funeral Directors Association and the Illinois Funeral Directors Association, regarding both topics. I also received a call from Memorial Hospital regarding their protocol. We are all working together, hoping and praying we get through this very soon.”

Meanwhile, weddings have been placed on hold or done through exhausting circumstance. Reports have featured brides and grooms in empty churches, being watched remotely by friends and family.

Health officials

St. Clair County Emergency Management, along with the county’s Public Health Department, is offering daily briefings on Facebook, giving the count on virus cases, the number of people tested, the confirmation of those infected, whether or not they are male or female and more. At month’s end, two people had died of the illness in the county — the first in Metro East.

On Sunday night, March 29, the message was more uplifting:

“Tonight, hundreds of vehicles paraded through Memorial and St Elizabeth’s Hospital’s parking lots honking their horns and flashing their lights during the shift change of doctors and nurses to show their support for their efforts,” the post said. “What a great show of support for these dedicated healthcare professionals.”

Employers still hiring

Madison County officials want the public

to know employers are hiring people to fill essential jobs.

“It’s been a shock to many people who’ve lost their jobs, through no fault of their own,” Chairman Kurt Prenzler said. “We want people to be aware of the employment opportunities throughout the region.”

A list of local and national companies currently hiring can be found on the Madison County Employment and Training Department’s website at https://www.co.madison.il.us/departments/employment_and_training/job_listings.php. The list is updated daily.

The employment and training offices are closed to the public, but information is available online and staff is available by phone and email for both employers and job seekers.

Tony Fuhrmann, director of employment and training, said many employers are looking to fast track their hiring process to fill the gap in their workforce. He said if a business or organization is seeking new hires, whether temporary or part-time, they should contact the employment and training office for assistance.

For assistance with resumes, email the One-Stop Service Coordinator, Darlene Ladd, at daladd@co.madison.il.us. Customers who have general inquiries or who need further assistance with their job search should call (618) 296-4301.

Businesses or organizations who would like to promote current job openings can contact Rebecca Marshall at remarshall@co.madison.il.us.

Among the many companies hiring are CVS, 50,000; Walmart, 150,000 temporary workers by the end of May for their stores, clubs, distribution centers and fulfillment centers; Dollar Tree, which also owns Family Dollar, 25,000 workers; grocery chains; the medical community; Amazon; and pizza businesses.



Regional Accomplishments



Growing Our Workforce

- Played a key role in professional expedited licensure directly impacting 110 professions for military and their spouses
- Presented to over 30,000+ individuals in the region promoting STEM workforce and technical careers through the Building Workforce²⁰³⁰ program

Promoting Southwestern Illinois

- Completed a regional marketing communications campaign to key internal and external economic development decision makers with regional partners
- SITE Selection Magazine, a high profile magazine, EVP, Conway Inc./ Site Selection Magazine, Ron Starner visited and toured the Southwestern IL region
- Consul of Economic Affairs for Consulate General of Japan in Chicago, Keidanren USA, and JETRO Chicago visited and toured the Southwestern IL region