May 7, 2020

The Honorable J.B. Pritzker
Governor
State of Illinois
207 State House
Springfield, IL 62706

Governor Pritzker,

On behalf of the Illinois Restaurant Association (IRA), I am writing to express our deep concerns about the provisions of the Restore Illinois plan that prohibit all 25,000+ eating and drinking establishments across the State of Illinois from resuming dine in service at any level until, at best, the end of June. This delay is excessive even by the most conservative national guidelines, does not take into account our industry’s pre-existing expertise in health and safety practices and unnecessarily threatens the viability of this critical sector of our economy. While we appreciate the efforts you and your team have taken to lay out a structured plan to reopen Illinois’ economy, we respectfully request that you reconsider the approach laid out in your initial proposal. The current plan underestimates the restaurant industry’s ability to reopen and implement whatever enhanced public health measures are deemed necessary.

This is more than an empty boast. The health and safety of our customers and employees is our top priority. The restaurant industry is accustomed to operating by the highest standards when it comes to sanitation, food safety and other health-focused operating requirements. Managers, chefs, servers and bartenders must complete mandatory certification courses that equip them with the knowledge of best practices that are designed to protect the health and well being of our customers. As a result, our industry is already health-focused, and prepared to effectively implement whatever safety procedures the state outlines as a part of its plan.

However, the Restore Illinois plan’s consecutive 28-day monitoring periods from Phase 2 to 3 and then again from Phase 3 to 4 do not take the health-focused nature of our industry, or the prevailing scientific and medical community expertise into consideration. This time frame is at least double the national standards recommended by Dr. Anthony Fauci who said that a 14-day period between reopening phases provides, “continuity that is safe, that is prudent, and that is careful.” Even the most cautious and conservative public health experts recommend 14-day evaluation cycles. No other state in the country has instituted such a lengthy monitoring period. We strongly encourage the state of Illinois to review the empirical data at the end of May from other states that have gradually reopened. Right now, the State is unilaterally implementing what amounts to a 56 day monitoring period on the restaurant industry. This puts its largest private sector employer at risk.

Based on all of the above, we respectfully request that you consider modifying the current Restore Illinois plan by moving the resumption of limited capacity, dine in service at restaurants and bars into Phase 3 of the plan. Our industry is eager to work with you to develop guidelines around safe reopening, including: limiting capacity, table spacing, PPE for employees, and whatever other preventative measures make sense. We are anxious to share our sanitation and food handling expertise with your team to assist the State in developing pragmatic
regulations that will prioritize public health and safety while giving restaurants the opportunity to safely resume their dine in operations in a timely manner.

Restaurants are the cornerstones of every county in Illinois, from Sangamon to Cook to Champaign to Rock Island – and they all desperately need help from the State of Illinois in order to survive now and thrive in the future. Under the current plan, even in counties that have experienced minimal cases of COVID-19, their restaurants will not be able to possibly resume dine in service until June 26 at the very earliest. We are asking that the State give them an opportunity to see a light at the end of the dark tunnel of this pandemic. Unnecessarily waiting until the end of June or beyond does not do that.

Right now, Illinois’ restaurants must find a path to keep their doors open when their sales are down 70% - 80% across the board. Small, independent restaurants and bars will not be able to survive for much longer without being able to open back up for dine in service in some form in the immediate future. More than 321,000 of the state’s 594,500 people employed in the restaurant and hospitality industry have been laid off due to COVID-19, and we estimate that 20% of restaurants will never reopen. Those that are still in operation will not last much longer without direct, targeted relief and practical regulations at all levels of government. For most food and beverage operations, being able to conduct business in Phase 3 versus Phase 4 will be the difference between a chance for a comeback or closing their doors for good.

The IRA remains ready and willing to work collaboratively with you to develop clear and effective guidelines for restaurants to reopen their dining rooms in Illinois. We are all in this together, as every single resident of Illinois patronizes restaurants. Restaurateurs are eager to continue supporting and serving more than 12 million Illinoisans that rely on us on a daily basis.

Thank you for your consideration of our request to allow for restaurants to reopen during Phase 3, and we stand ready to assist as you need.

Sincerely,

Sam Toia
President & CEO
Illinois Restaurant Association