

# Cuomo pulls WNY out of micro-cluster zones

## 'New York Forward' reopening rules remain in place

**BY JOSHUA MALONI**  
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Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Wednesday said the holiday coronavirus surge has ended, and he canceled the micro-cluster zones in Erie and Niagara counties.

"It's safe to say the holiday surge was anticipated, that holiday surge did happen. But the holiday surge is over," he said. "If you look at the numbers over the past week, you see positivity on the decline. Our high point was 7.9%; we're down to 5.6%. You see the hospitalization rate on the decline. First the increase slows; we've even had some negative days. Every curve in every region (is down)."

Cuomo added, "Given the progress they made, the restrictions are lifted in those zones."

The governor announced the start of the micro-cluster action initiative last October. He said this strategy would take a more detailed approach to curtailing COVID-19's spread. Cuomo presented three zones: "yellow," "orange" and "red," with each level bringing more restrictions.

On Nov. 9, parts of Erie County – including Grand Island – were placed into the precautionary "yellow zone." Restaurants and gyms were among the areas facing increased restrictions on gatherings, and schools were required to implement additional testing.

Nine days later – and with the infection rate still climbing – Cuomo moved portions of Erie County into an "orange zone," which came with additional restrictions. Most notably, indoor dining was prohibited.

Portions of Niagara County went into a "yellow zone" on Dec. 14.

About that time, Cuomo updated the micro-cluster strategy to focus more on hospital capacity. In particular, if a region's hospital network had 15% or less capacity, a "red zone" would be triggered.

Cuomo said, "Hospital capacity today, we are in a good place all across the state." In Western New York, capacity is 35%.

He specifically noted Erie Coun-

ty's infection rate of those tested in the "orange zone" went from a high of 7.82% to a much-lower 5.18% percent today. The "yellow zone," likewise, hit a peak of 9.23%, but has now fallen to 5.47%.

Niagara County currently has a 6.6% seven-day rolling average.

The state's overall high point was 7.9%. The infection rate is now 5.6%.

Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz has been pushing for a zone reduction for several weeks, noting his area's infection rate dropped below places in a "yellow zone."

Following Cuomo's announcement, Poloncarz tweeted, "We deserved to have those restrictions lifted because our new COVID-19 case rate and hospitalizations have dropped significantly. Thank you to @NYGovCuomo for doing so."

Niagara County Legislature Chairwoman Becky Wydysz released a statement that read, "I'm happy that we appear to be moving past the holiday surge which has led to the governor lifting his 'yellow zone' designation in Niagara County. As the new positive cases of COVID-19 decrease and the number of people vaccinated increase, we can begin to look forward to better times. But that does not mean we are there yet. Everyone is well aware of the necessary precautions that need to continue to be taken to keep you and others safe. As more of our economy opens, as more sporting activities come back on line, it is more important than ever to follow guidelines so we do not head backward."

A recent lawsuit allowed Erie County restaurants in an "orange zone" to move down to a "yellow zone." The ruling permitted indoor dining to resume with the zone's four-person-per-table maximum.

Eateries in both zones were required to close at 10 p.m. for on-premises consumption. Cuomo said that restriction would continue.

He explained, "If you listen to



Gov. Andrew Cuomo held a COVID-19 press briefing update at Roswell Park in Buffalo on Monday. He was joined by Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul (Photos by Darren McGee/Office of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo; graphics also courtesy of the governor's office)

the federal guidance, or the federal experience, or the CDC, or what we've seen here in this state, when you keep the restaurants open late, that tends to be more problematic; there tends to be more crowding; there tends to be more drinking, etc. And with restaurants, we're trying to keep it to actual eating, as opposed to the restaurant turning into a bar. So, at this time, no; we are not changing the curfew at this time."

Secretary to the Governor Melissa DeRosa noted all other "New York Forward" reopening guidelines remain in place. That includes a 50% indoor capacity cap for retailers, restaurateurs and personal care providers, and a 33% limit for gyms and fitness centers. Per a Supreme Court ruling, gatherings in New York houses of worship are not limited.

### Elective Surgeries Resume

Speaking to the media Monday at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center in Buffalo, Cuomo said, "Elective surgeries had been stopped in Erie County, because we wanted to make sure we had enough hospital capacity for that spike. We now feel comfortable... elective surgeries can start, once again, in Erie County. And as I said, we're gonna have some more adjustments over the next couple of days."

Cuomo was joined by Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul.

"It's been tough to live in these zones; I've been living in an 'orange zone' now since the middle of November," she said. "We totally understand it, and I have been out speaking to the media, helping them understand that the governor forecast this spike. We talked about what could happen after the holidays – and, indeed in Buffalo, the holidays didn't end Jan. 1, because we went for weeks of (Buffalo Bills) playoff games, and that brought more people together. So, it was very cautious and smart to wait and see what happens until these adjustments are made. But I would say this region's ready. We've worked very hard to get hospital capacity up, and that's the most important dynamic."

Speaking on behalf of Catholic Health, Mercy Hospital of Buffalo President Eddie Bratko said, "The resumption of elective surgeries is good news for patients throughout Western New York and we thank Gov. Cuomo for today's announcement. Catholic Health has been meeting with our surgical chiefs and chairs throughout this latest suspension to plan for the eventual resumption of elective cases. We have a meeting scheduled for tomorrow to kickoff our plan to resume elective surgeries

quickly and safely. Our surgeons will be reaching out to patients in the coming days to schedule their procedures and pre-op testing, which includes a COVID test. Because of the testing required prior to surgery, it (might) take several days for the elective cases to begin. Fortunately, we have the necessary processes and procedures in place from when we resumed elective surgeries in the spring and expect this to be a smooth transition for our surgeons and patients."

Kaleida Health CEO Robert J. Nesselbush said, "On behalf of the entire Kaleida Health workforce and the patients that we serve, we want to thank Gov. Cuomo for today's announcement about the resumption of elective surgeries in Erie County. This will undoubtedly have a positive impact on patient care and outcomes, not to mention our operations and our overall financial position."

"The pandemic has had a catastrophic impact on the health care delivery system here in Buffalo, Western New York and across New York state. COVID-19 has also put tremendous stress on thousands of patients who have had to put their health on hold as we battled this crisis together. We are most happy for these patients, who can now receive the world-class health care that our employees and physicians are known for. The dedication and efforts of our frontline workforce have been nothing short of heroic this past year."

Cuomo announced New York's rate of transmission, or Rt, has dropped below 1. An Rt of 1 or more means COVID-19 will spread from one person to one or more people, on average.

"You can see, at our high point, one person was infecting two-and-a-half other people. They say anything over 1, the virus is out of control – when one person is infecting more than one other person. And, ideally, you want to be under 1. And that's where we are right now; but it's been a bumpy ride to get here," Cuomo said.

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