

Joint Statement from the National Muslim Task Force on COVID-19 Regarding a Phased Reopening of Mosques across the United States

Summary

As states across the United States start a gradual reopening of local businesses, public spaces and civic services, there is an urgent need for guidance regarding how Islamic centers and mosques across the country can implement safe and responsible reopenings. In consultation with public health and religious experts, this statement sets out the principles and practices by which Islamic centers and mosques can implement reopenings of their services.

With respect to principles, our statement recognizes (i) God sends down both disease and cure and that we must believe in His Divine Wisdom and pray for Divine deliverance from this trial; (ii) that the shuttering of Islamic centers and mosques has and continues to greatly impact the religious and social lives of the Muslim American community as well as its overall well-being; (iii) that the health risks posed by COVID-19 remain credible to both individuals and communities and will likely continue for months; (iv) that every mosque community is unique with respect to the surrounding public health context, state authority guidance, and capabilities to safely implement reopening, and (v) that mitigating health risks while reopening aspects of mosque-based communal religious life will require significant changes in rituals and social practices for the foreseeable future.

With respect to practices, the National Muslim Task Force on COVID-19 continues to strongly urge households, community organizations, and individuals to adhere to public health and state authority guidance by practicing social distancing, wearing masks in public spaces, limiting public gatherings to less than 10 individuals, and restricting travel to that needed for essential needs. We acknowledge that some mosques may be able to open for communal religious obligations, i.e. Friday (Jummah services), where state authorities allow and the guidelines below are implemented, in a very-restricted fashion in the near future. We have provided a recommended check-list for mosque administration to review as they consider the practicalities of opening. All other public gatherings, given that they are of lesser religious consequence, should remain suspended for the time-being; a phased and cautious approach to reopening is necessary.

Background

As state and local governments begin to allow for the reopening of public spaces, workplaces, businesses and places of worship, they continue to acknowledge the real threat COVID-19 presents to the health of individuals and the well-being of our society. Over 1.3 million people have been infected by COVID-19 in the US, and nearly 80,000 people have died from the disease. The US remains the epicenter of the pandemic as over 25% of the number of cases and deaths from the disease occur within its borders. There continues to be no vaccine to prevent transmission of, and mortality from, the disease, and there is no known early and effective treatment. As such social distancing and restrictions on public gatherings remain the mainstay of prevention. We call on Muslim community leaders to implement these preventive practices. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continue to call for:

1. Social distancing with six feet between people
2. Restricting public gatherings to no more than ten people, appropriately spaced six feet apart
3. Wearing facial masks in public
4. Avoiding non-essential travel and social visits

Over the past 8 weeks of “stay-at-home” and “shelter-in-place” orders, we have made significant progress in disrupting the spread of the disease around the country. While the number of COVID-19

cases are on the decline in some areas (the “curve is starting to downtrend”), and the number of cases has stabilized in others (the curve has “flattened”), there continues to be a rise in the number of cases of COVID-19 in most places as testing increases. As such a wholesale reopening is ill-advised and dangerous. The CDC, the White House Task Force on COVID-19, and many state authorities, are implementing phased re-openings in light of the increased number of cases in local areas. Muslim community leaders need to pay close attention to local guidance as they consider phased re-openings of their community centers and mosques. Precaution is stressed and recommended.

Guidelines for Mosques and Islamic Centers Considering Friday Prayer Opening

Islamic centers and mosques play many important roles in religious and communal life. They are places of worship, education, social services, and more, and they are critical to Muslim American identity. In light of the pandemic these organizations will continue to play a key role in slowing and preventing the spread of COVID-19 within the community. At the same time their core and essential functions need to be carefully considered and practically implemented, where possible. Such mosque functions relate to the fulfillment of communal obligations, *fardh kifaya*, where moral duties thrust on every member of the community can be satisfied by the practice of a few members of the community in the mosque. Mosques fulfill many such duties, e.g. burial rights, but for this statement we focus on the establishment of Friday (Jumma) prayers which is both an individual and communal responsibility. The guidelines below are provisional, and were developed in consultation with members of the Fiqh Council of North America, American Muslim Jurists Association, Chicagoland Ulema, and the Initiative of Islam and Medicine. These organizations may issue further guidance in the near future at which point any recommendation in this statement that conflicts will be retracted.

In these past weeks, the special obligation of Friday prayers had been suspended and replaced by the routine obligation of midday prayers (Dhuhr) for most of the Muslim American community. This was due to the heightened health risks posed by COVID-19 and state authority mandates to restrict public gatherings and shutter mosques. Current guidance may allow for gatherings of 10 people or less, and in some places where COVID-19 is on the decline, and up to 50 people may be able to gather in the near future. As such limited resumption of Friday prayers may be possible in an extremely restricted fashion and with the following adaptations:

- Limit the number of people gathering (10 presently), as advised by local state authorities. This **MUST** be implemented. This will require logistical coordination as well as community education. Here are some ways to accomplish this task:
 - Mosques remain closed for public prayers with only essential mosque staff (Imam and employees) performing the Friday prayer as a symbolic religious act in fulfillment with the command to establish communal prayer
 - Based on the legal precedent of choosing lots (*qurra*), mosque administration must implement a lottery system with advanced sign-up by which community members are assigned and notified about the specific jumma service they can attend (either which week and/or which time slot).
- In all cases, in addition to the limit on numbers above, the following **must hold**:
 - Most importantly, individuals upon whom Friday prayer is not obligatory should be instructed to stay at home (e.g. children, disabled, etc.), and individuals at high-risk of death should they get infected with COVID-19 (e.g. aged >65, those with high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, cancer and immunocompromised state), or those who are sick (have fever, cough, runny nose, diarrhea, etc.) should be

counseled that the Friday prayer obligation is lifted from them. Mosque leadership and staff need to be ready to implement such screening at the entrances of mosques and during Friday prayer sign-up. This messaging and screening is of vital importance to decrease harms from and ensure the well-being of the entire community. It is in-line with the highest religious goals in the Shari'ah (*jalb al-masalih wa dar al-mafasid*) and will prevent communal strife and division. **If unable to be practically accomplished then mosques should not reopen for limited Friday prayers yet.**

- Mosque staff must monitor the number of individuals entering the premises and implement screening protocols to ensure safety and eligibility [see above and enclosed checklist]
 - Mosques should be ready to provide facial masks to individuals who do not have them and have plentiful hand sanitizing stations.
- Where practical and possible, Friday prayers can be performed outside on the grounds of the mosque or parking lot spaces, with 6 feet of separation, to reduce transmission risks.
- Adequate distancing between prayer rows and individuals **MUST** be implemented. Thus every other row can be filled and individuals within rows can be spaced several feet apart. In light of the health risks posed by prayer shoulder-to-shoulder, Islamic scholars have reaffirmed the validity of congregational prayers where congregants are close to one another but not shoulder to shoulder.
- Sermons must be kept as short as possible so as to fulfill the obligatory components and reduce time spent in the gathering. Likewise the 2-rakat fardh prayer should be performed expediently.
- Individuals should be instructed to perform Sunnah prayers (both before and after) at home. This practice is in line with the Prophet's guidance to enliven one's house with prayer.
- Individuals should wear face masks during the entirety of the services.
- Public Wudu areas should be kept closed as respiratory droplets can propagate in these areas. Individual restrooms can be kept open for dire needs and once used must be thoroughly cleaned.

The Task Force provides these recommendations (also see attachment) in light of the best available public health and religious guidance for Islamic centers and mosque administrators if and when they choose to re-open. The Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) instructed us "every one of you is a shepherd and will be asked about [how well you took care of] those in your flock..." **Hence mosque leadership bears an important moral responsibility to ensure safety during a potential re-opening.**

We recognize that each Islamic center/mosque will have a different plan based on available human and financial resources. Therefore, we strongly encourage mosques to conduct outreach, community education, and plan ahead so that limited religious services can be safely reinstated in the near future.

Health Protocols for Islamic Center/Mosque Staff and Volunteers and Facilities Management

As Islamic centers/mosques consider limited and phased reopening, it is imperative to create signage and notices reminding individuals of the restrictions noted above near entrances and exits.

Additionally, all employees and volunteers should receive training on appropriate cleaning and disinfection, hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette (wearing face masks at all times). Employees and

volunteers should also be screened for any cold-like symptoms before coming into the masjid. If anyone exhibits any COVID-19 symptoms, as outlined by the CDC or World Health Organization (WHO), they must be sent home, self-quarantine, and only be allowed to return once a physician has certified them free from COVID-19.

The Imam, masjid administrators, and staff should practice regular hand hygiene either through alcohol-based hand sanitizers (greater than 60% alcohol content) or hand washing with soap for at least 20 seconds. While working in the masjid, everyone should continue to observe social distancing and maintain 6 feet of separation between one another. In addition to distancing, face coverings with masks, cleanliness, and sanitation should be practiced regularly.

Islamic centers and mosques should create a dedicated cleaning and disinfection team that uses [EPA-approved disinfectants](#) to clean doors, doorknobs, tables, chairs, restrooms on a routine schedule. Prayer rugs and carpets should be cleaned with a disinfectant after each prayer service. Leadership must also take steps to ensure water systems are functioning appropriately and are disinfected after so many weeks of not being in-use, as some dangerous bacteria can grow.

Closing Remarks

Beyond the specific recommendations noted above to Imams and Masjid administrators, the Task force offers some general advice as local authorities begin to reopen businesses, the public and houses of worship. The Task force recognizes that local Mosques are facing difficulties and challenges because of the current pandemic. We encourage Imams and Administrators to reach out for assistance and guidance from other local and national organizations to support them in making a decision to reopen their mosque as states begin to reopen.

The National Muslim Task Force on COVID-19 prays that Allah (swt) facilitate our lives and practices in Ramadan, protect our communities, and reward those working on the frontlines of this pandemic. We also pray that He accepts our fasts, acts of worship and prayers during this blessed month, and grants success over this pandemic.

Respectfully,

The National Muslim Task Force on COVID-19

Organizations:

American Muslim Health Professionals (AMHP)

Fiqh Council of North American (FCNA)

Islamic Medical Association of North American (IMANA)

Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)

Attachment 1: Islamic Center and Mosque Reopening Checklist

Category	Task	Completed/ Available	Need to Complete	Comments/Notes:
Reopening Plan and Strategy	Develop a detailed reopening plan with review and feedback from Imam, mosque leadership and local public health experts.			
	Secure human and financial resources, and develop the educational messages, to enable a safe and limited re-opening			
Logistical and Administrat ive Plan	Designate a dedicated cleaning staff with required training and protocols			
	Plentiful hand sanitizing stations for strategic locations in the center			
	Carpet cleaning disinfectants (dry cleaning powders or liquid cleaning)			
	Check functioning and cleanliness of in-house water systems and ventilation systems			
	Design and post signs and placards regarding the phased opening conditions and guidelines			
	Develop a plan for lottery system, as needed, and education for Friday prayers			
	Adequate PPE (e.g. masks) for staff and potential congregants			
Employees/ Volunteers	Designate a screening team to perform temperature checks and protocols to assure limits and conditions for Friday prayer are met			
	Ensure that staff and volunteers are healthy and asymptomatic (without symptoms)			

	Educate employees/volunteers on symptoms, hygiene, and cleaning protocols			
	Educate employees/volunteers on reopening protocols			
Community Members	Inform community of reopening plans, including lottery protocols, areas of the mosque that will be opened or kept close (e.g. the wudu area)			
	Inform community of screening practices that will be implemented as well as lottery protocol. Individuals at risk for infection or that are sick will be asked to stay at home. See statement above for details.			
	Inform community of screening practices that will be implemented as well as lottery protocol			
	Inform community of protocols for salah as cited by the Fiqh councils			