



Committed Leaders.
Shared Vision.
Greater Good.

November 19, 2020

The Honorable Jay Inslee
Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable Andy Billig
Senate Majority Leader
PO Box 40403
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable Laurie Jinkins
Speaker of the House
PO Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable Mark Schoesler
Senate Republican Leader
PO Box 40409
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable J.T. Wilcox
House Republican Leader
PO Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504

Dear Governor and Legislative Leadership:

We have entered another difficult and perilous phase in the battle with COVID-19 in Washington State. As an organization representing leading employers in Puget Sound, Challenge Seattle offers our continued support for decisive leadership to address the heightened health risks we currently face. We stand ready to do our part through the type of public/private partnership that helped the state in the spring and that we believe will be essential as we move forward, both to manage through the current phase and for the longer term.

We recognize and support the need for renewed measures to keep the public safe. We believe it is important to couple these measures with complementary steps to support virus suppression and address the economic and social impact on our communities.

We have learned a lot since March about how best to manage through COVID-19. More accurate and timely data and better therapeutics are already playing an important role. But as in March, the most important key to success is that we all work together. The next several months will require even closer collaboration between the public and private sectors, non-profit groups, and the state's residents.

We will need to pursue a shared agenda to protect the public's physical and mental health and people's jobs. We need to base our actions on a clear understanding of our population's diverse needs, including older citizens who are most vulnerable to the disease, children who are suffering amidst remote schooling, the impact on parents who are leaving the workforce, adults at home alone who may be suffering from mental health challenges, those who have been disproportionately impacted, and working people who live from paycheck to paycheck.



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We offer a six-point plan to focus attention on what we believe are critical short-term needs and longer-term opportunities for recovery.

- **Increase testing and contact tracing.** We believe there remains an urgent need to increase testing and contact tracing, both in King County and more broadly across the state. One lesson since March is that COVID-19 tends to surge in localized hot spots and then spreads more broadly. We have seen this in the southern part of King County, for example. In this sense, fighting COVID is a bit like fighting fires, where it is critical to contain a hot spot before it spreads.

With better data resources, we have a capability in November we lacked in March, namely the ability to move testing and tracing resources to hot spots quickly. But we need to invest more in testing and tracing statewide to better pursue this approach, which requires the hiring and training of additional contact tracers. We then need strong coordination between the state with local public health authorities to immediately swarm resources to hot spots where help is needed most. In the coming months we should join together as we look forward to a contact tracing cellphone app. That, if used widely, could make a real difference in bending the curve.

- **Provide targeted assistance to low-income Washingtonians.** A second lesson from recent months is the difficulties confronting working people who are living from paycheck to paycheck. This is disproportionately impacting people of color. Most low-income individuals do not have jobs they can perform from home. And we are learning that such individuals may conclude that they simply cannot afford to stay home and away from work even when they test positive or suffer from COVID symptoms. This obviously risks spreading the virus more rapidly to other areas. While the CARES Act provided some relief, it is both limited and set to expire on December 31. While we await much needed help from the Federal Government, the state should explore financial assistance that can be provided on an immediate basis to assist low-income employees who test positive, so they can remain home.
- **Provide more financial help for small businesses.** The latest workplace restrictions, while necessary, are likely to prove devastating to a broadening range of small businesses that have already been battered by COVID-19. The state should provide targeted loans and other financial support for struggling small businesses, with an emphasis on those most disproportionately impacted. We support the Governor's announcement to act on this need immediately while we await action by Congress.
- **Commit to a plan to reopen schools in January if COVID rates fall.** One of the most important lessons learned since March is the strong and disproportionate impact on children confined to remote learning and their working parents, with a disproportionate impact on working mothers confronting pressure to leave the workforce. Studies, including by local experts of global renown, have established that it is possible to reopen schools safely, especially for elementary age students. While this obviously needs to wait until COVID infection rates are falling, the time has come to commit Washington to reopen schools at the start of the New Year in a safe manner, starting with K-5 students. This can lay the foundation for the even broader work that will be needed to address the learning loss of our state's students, with an emphasis on those disproportionately impacted.



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- **Broaden collaboration and strengthen public communications.** The winter months will bring added challenges, and further collaboration between the public and private sectors will be critical. If we fail to manage the physical and mental health issues in coordination with the economic challenges, we risk finding that we will have fewer jobs in the state even after the broad distribution of vaccines. As leading employers, we are committed to stepping forward and doing our part. This includes – but is by no means confined to – our continued messaging to our employees about the importance of masking, social distancing, and other safe practices.

We will also benefit with continuing improvements in public reports that focus more on the public health measurements that best inform the public about the challenges we confront. This includes more focused reports on positivity rates in hot spots, hospitalizations, and trends regarding hospital capacity. We are committed to helping our employees and the public more broadly better understand the significance of these types of trends, to help people remain well-informed about the evolving health situation.

- **Prepare for Vaccine Distribution & Build Public Confidence.** The availability of vaccines ahead of projections with higher than expected effectiveness is welcome news. Funding and planning are essential to transport, store and then timely and equitably distribute the vaccine. We clearly need state and federal support to do this well. To stop the spread of the virus will also require a campaign joining the public and private sectors to educate and build consumer confidence in the vaccine by using our own nationally recognized and locally trusted experts.

These news accounts of vaccine advances are cause for optimism about our future. But our state has several months of hard work before we reach the point when the public will have broader public immunity to COVID-19. And even then, we will face years of hard work to rebuild the economy. At Challenge Seattle we are committed to working closely and collaboratively to support our region and state. We believe that the six steps outlined here can help us move more quickly in the right direction.

Sincerely,

Chris Gregoire, CEO
On behalf of Challenge Seattle

CC: Senator Patty Murray, Senator Maria Cantwell, Congresswoman Suzan DelBene, Congressman Rick Larsen, Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler, Congressman Dan Newhouse, Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Congressman Derek Kilmer, Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, Congresswoman Kim Schrier, Congressman Adam Smith, Congressman Denny Heck, Congresswoman-Elect Marilyn Strickland