

Wolf's 'major disaster' declaration request granted by Trump

By: *Justin Henry*

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Gov. Tom Wolf successfully requested a major disaster declaration from the federal government.
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President Trump declared that a major disaster exists in Pennsylvania, a status which mobilizes many of the nationwide disaster response measures under the president's March 13 state-of-emergency declaration to accommodate the commonwealth's specific requests during the coronavirus pandemic.

Gov. Tom Wolf on Sunday requested a major disaster declaration from President Trump through the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide additional support for the state, counties, municipal governments, certain nonprofits and certain individuals who have been impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. Trump announced his approval of the request on Monday.

Under the major disaster declaration, state, county and municipal governments, as well as eligible private non-profits can receive reimbursement for up to 75% of eligible expenses related to the response to the COVID-19 outbreak, according to a statement from the governor's office. Eligible expenses can include but are not limited to costs associated with paying overtime, or materials and equipment purchases, and the declaration also provides direct federal assistance, which provides federal materials and supplies to support state and local response efforts, Wolf said.

"The COVID-19 outbreak has taxed our commonwealth and our communities in ways that are almost incomprehensible," the governor said in his plea. "I am calling on the president and the federal government to make available to us the assistance that will make a tangible difference in the lives of our friends and neighbors, and the dedicated public servants who are working in overdrive to support them."

Wolf said his request for other federal aid remains under consideration, as his letter to the President included the following Individual Assistance programs – Disaster Unemployment Assistance, Crisis Counseling, Community Disaster Loans and the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Program; and Statewide Hazard Mitigation.

"I remain unwavering in my call for the approval of the rest of my request, which will provide more direct support to our friends and neighbors who are facing financial difficulties that otherwise could be insurmountable," he said in a statement issued Tuesday afternoon.

Many of the details regarding the federal government's support for the commonwealth at this time are pending, the White House said in an official statement. FEMA officials named MaryAnn Tierny as federal coordinating officer for operations in affected areas in the commonwealth.

The declaration of a major disaster comes off the heels of mandates from the Wolf administration for stay-at-home orders for 26 the commonwealth's 67 counties. Since the first reported cases of the coronavirus in the commonwealth, more than 4,000 Pennsylvanians have tested positive for the coronavirus and 48 have died. Meanwhile, more than 700,000 have filed for unemployment insurance benefits with the state.

Pennsylvania has the fifth largest population of citizens aged 65 and older, 18.5% or 2.2 million of the overall population, the primary demographic at risk for contracting and showing symptoms of COVID-19. That's why Gov. Wolf asked for federal support for the state's health care infrastructure.

Wolf said resources of medical facilities in the state are "rapidly depleting," and hospitals and first responders are struggling to triage and isolate potentially affected individuals, "significantly disrupting lifesaving and life-sustaining services."

"The limited number of qualified medical personnel is decreasing while COVID-19 continues to spread," Wolf wrote.

The commonwealth has a poverty rate of 12.1% of the population, the primary demographic without access to health insurance, and "with the sharp increase in layoffs due to COVID-19, the number of uninsured Pennsylvanians will increase," according to Wolf's request. The latest figures show 5.5% of the state's population do not have health insurance, and the increasing number of unemployed workers suggests the number of uninsured Pennsylvanians will increase.

"This event will have wide-reaching negative impacts on the Commonwealth's healthcare infrastructure," the governor said. "Taken in conjunction with reports on COVID-19's disproportionate impact on older demographics, COVID-19 could affect a staggering number of older Pennsylvanians, those shown to be most susceptible to the virus," Wolf said.

A March 13 survey of Pennsylvania businesses "to determine economic impact because of the Business Closure Orders" indicated that a majority of commonwealth businesses are experiencing greater than 70% of loss in revenue because of the COVID-19 emergency. The state Department of Community and Economic Development has processed more than 21,000 requests from businesses seeking exemption from the business closure order.

As a result, 746,666 unemployment compensation requests have been filed since March 1, 2020. February's unemployment rate was 4.7%, although the governor expects this figure to "increase dramatically," due to the skyrocketing numbers that have been reported so far in March. The current month's total won't be available until mid-April.



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