

October 12, 2020

The Honorable Mike Shirkey  
Senate Majority Leader  
S-102 Capitol Building  
Lansing, MI 48933

Dear Majority Leader Shirkey,

As experts in public health and medicine, we read with concern your comments about “herd immunity” and the coronavirus pandemic in an October 10, 2020 article on [mlive.com](#).

With cases of COVID-19 rising significantly in Michigan and across the country, we are writing to ask you to clarify these comments. We also suggest that the Michigan Senate convene a hearing of experts who are recommended by deans of Michigan schools of public health and medicine, so they can share current evidence about what can be done to reduce the spread of the coronavirus and save lives.

### **Comments Reported on October 10**

In the [mlive.com article](#), published this weekend, you reportedly stated of the virus, **“Nobody should be misled here or of the opinion that you can keep it from spreading -- it’s going to spread, so we just do the best we can.”**

We certainly agree that the coronavirus will not disappear on its own. However, how much the virus spreads is not a matter of fate; it is very much up to us. There is strong evidence of specific steps that individuals can take in their own lives to reduce the chance of coronavirus infection for themselves and others. There is also strong evidence of steps that the states can take through policy to protect state residents from serious illness and death and contribute to a successful rebound of the economy.

[Individuals](#) can wash their hands, wear masks, and keep at least six feet of distance from others. States can take such steps as [closing bars](#) and limiting large [indoor gatherings](#), because these settings in areas with substantial community transmission pose a high risk of contagion. Moreover, there is strong evidence supporting state-directed mask mandates.

For example, one [study](#) published in *Health Affairs* found a consistent reduction in viral spread among states that mandated mask-wearing compared to those that did not. Another

[study](#) published this month in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found that states that reopened restaurants before a mask mandate experienced ten times the number of excess cases compared to those that had a mask mandate in place prior to reopening. This study found that “over 50,000 excess deaths were prevented within 6 weeks in 13 states that implemented mask mandates prior to reopening.” [Other studies](#) have also found benefits.

You also stated, **“I’m also a big believer that there’s an element of herd immunity that needs to take place.”**

There is a mistaken view held by some that the solution to the pandemic is to wait for enough people to fall ill that the spread of the virus naturally slows down. One problem with this approach is that many people will need to fall ill before this level of herd immunity can be achieved. As of October 9, about 150,000 Michiganders have been diagnosed with coronavirus infection. The number of total infections may be as much as 10 times greater, which would mean that about 1.5 million people have been infected.

If “herd immunity” were to begin after about 80% of the state’s population has been infected, as some believe, then 6.5 million more Michiganders would still need to contract COVID-19. At the current mortality rate, this would mean **more than 30,000 additional deaths** -- more than four times the number of deaths to date.

Another problem with waiting for “herd immunity” is that even if herd immunity is achieved, the coronavirus can still infect people. This means that even after a tremendous loss of life, there would still be an ongoing risk, leaving many understandably wary about returning to their previous levels of activity.

A much better alternative would be to control the spread of the coronavirus through policies based on evidence, followed by broad use of a safe and effective vaccine when available. We ask that you clarify your remarks about herd immunity to avoid leaving the impression that a leader of your stature is supporting greater spread of coronavirus as public policy.

### **Recommendation for a Hearing on the Science**

Now nearly 10 months into the pandemic, there is much known about the novel coronavirus and how to reduce its spread. Many nations of the world have found success by following recommendations on hand washing, mask wearing, isolation, quarantine, and contact tracing, as well as other public health measures. To date, Michigan has been a national leader in using evidence to guide its response, accounting for a relatively low rate of infection for much of the late spring and summer.

However, cases are on the rise significantly in many places around the country, including Michigan. To understand the current situation and how best to respond, we suggest that the Senate convene a hearing with recognized experts in public health and medicine with expertise

in COVID-19 who are recommended by the deans of public health and medicine in the State of Michigan.

Such a hearing would give experts the opportunity to share evidence, as well as provide Senators the chance to ask questions about the virus, its spread, and what can be done to save more lives.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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*This letter represents the views of the signatories and not necessarily their institutions.*