



## Quarantine, travel, unemployment benefits, burn ban, census, economic relief, and the budget

How's quarantine?

I've been doing it for more than a week, and I'm well.

I hope you are too.

The governor has extended social-distancing and travel mandates until **April 21, 2020**. It's possible he may prolong them again. He also extended statewide school closures from May 1 to the end of the current school year. All this demonstrates the need to continue to honor the threat that is coronavirus.

Do you have questions about the disease, health mandates, and economic relief? If so, try these links:

- [Alaska Coronavirus Response Hub](#) – The latest number and breakdown of COVID-19 cases in the Last Frontier, updated each day by noon
- [Alaska Department of Health and Social Services COVID 19 Website](#) – Information on the coronavirus, what to do if you're sick, public health alerts, and updates from [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [COVID-19 Health Mandates](#) – Social-distancing requirements, self-quarantine orders, and limits on travel, businesses, public gatherings, and medical procedures
- The [Alaska COVID-19 Economic Stabilization Website](#) – Information on [Unemployment Insurance](#), [Small Business Assistance](#), [Housing](#), and more

### Travel Protocol

A Fairbanks woman contacted me from the Lower 48 last week, after getting my e-news blast, asking whether she and her husband could come back to Alaska under the state's coronavirus travel mandate.

Yes, they could come home.

That was the answer my staff got from a warm, kind, and helpful woman named Marie at [Alaska 211](#), a service operated by United Way of Anchorage. She said the couple would have to do two things:

1. Fill out a **state travel declaration form** that asks for their names and destination upon arriving at the Anchorage or Fairbanks airport
2. Stay in **quarantine** at home for 14 days

**Alaska 211** is an excellent service to get answers to questions about the coronavirus and state COVID-19 mandates. The call center is open seven days a week, from 7:00 am to 8:00 pm.

Call **211** or **1 (800) 478-2221**.

Shoot them an email at [alaska211@ak.org](mailto:alaska211@ak.org) or check out [their website](#).

It's heartwarming to know there are good people like those at Alaska 211, eager to give a hand and offer an encouraging word. Sometimes, the worst of times can bring out the best in people.

### Unemployment Benefits

Are you trying to file for unemployment benefits?

The state is hiring more people and making upgrades to accommodate increased traffic caused by more and more Alaskans being unable to work due to coronavirus and COVID-19 restrictions. As of March 28, there were **34,435 new and continued unemployment insurance claims**.

Filing can be done online, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development now allows folks to apply every week, instead of every two weeks. To file online:

- Go to [my.Alaska.gov](http://my.Alaska.gov)
- Click on the **Unemployment Insurance Benefits** link

For help over the phone, call one of these numbers:

- **Anchorage** – (907) 269-4700
- **Fairbanks** – (907) 451-2871
- **Juneau** – (907) 465-5552
- **Other locations** – (888) 252-2557

The governor last month signed into law [House Bill 308](#), a measure that expands unemployment benefits by:

- Allowing people who have lost jobs due to COVID-19 to access unemployment benefits because a business closed, workers need to care for their children, or they need to isolate themselves to stay healthy
- Waiving the 1-week waiting period, allowing benefits to be paid faster
- Increasing the dependent allowance from \$24 to \$75 per dependent and removing the 3-dependent limit

HB 308 allows unemployment benefits to be retroactive to March 1, 2020. It also speeds up the time to process claims so people can get unemployment checks within a week or so of filing. Filing once a week instead of every two weeks should keep benefits coming in on a regular basis.

State labor department employees are scrambling to implement these changes as well as new federal benefits that:

- Allow an additional \$600 a week in unemployment insurance for four months
- Extend assistance to gig-economy workers who don't normally pay unemployment insurance, through a new Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program

Don't lose hope if you're having trouble filing for any of these options. Improvements are being made each day to make it easier to get them. Keep plugging away at it.

### Burn Ban

Alaska is suspending burn permits **starting Friday, May 1**, over concerns about how coronavirus might weaken the workforce that fights wildfires.

Remember last year's terrible fire season? Let's not do that again. According to [an excellent April 7 story in the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner](#), **more than 5,000 firefighters** from Alaska and outside the state toiled long and hard last year to keep people, homes, businesses, and communities safe in the Interior, the Mat-Su, the Kenai, and elsewhere. There were 719 wildfires in 2019 that scorched **2.68 million acres**.

To help prevent that from happening again, [the Alaska Division of Forestry is suspending all small- and large-scale burn permits](#) on state, private, and municipal lands. The burn ban applies to:

- Using burn barrels
- Burning debris piles
- Outdoor burning allowed under previous permits

The statewide burn ban does **not** apply to:

- Cooking, warming, or signaling fires that are less than 3-feet wide and 2-feet high
- Commercially manufactured outdoor camp stoves, burners, and heaters with built-in flame safety mechanisms

Anyone who violates the burn ban will face a fine or arrest in court.

The state expects a wildland firefighter shortage this year because of coronavirus travel restrictions and quarantine requirements. What's more, firefighters are at risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 while working close to each other or staying in camp.

Given a double-whammy danger of COVID-19 and wildfires, firefighters and those who support them need our help. Honor the burn ban. Don't risk hurting the lives of others, especially those fine men and women who fight fires on our behalf. Help them help all of us.

### The Census

Have you responded to this year's U.S. Census yet?

If yes, thank you.

If not, please do. Nothing less than funding from Uncle Sam is on the line. Schools, roads, health care, and even federal coronavirus relief for states is based on population counts done every ten years. And this year's the year.

According to [a recent Alaska Public Media story](#), Alaska is dead last in filling out census forms. Only 26.7 percent of households filled them out as of April 3, well below the national rate of 42.8 percent.

We can do better than that. We **MUST** do better than that.

It's simple. Here's how:

- Go online to [my2020census.gov](http://my2020census.gov)
- Click on **Start Questionnaire**
- Enter the **Census ID** code you got in the mail; if you didn't get one, go ahead without it
- Fill out the questionnaire

You also can fill out the form by phone. Simply call **1 (844) 330-2020**.

There's no penalty if you or your household already filled out the form. The U.S. Census Bureau can weed out duplicates.

Please do it. For yourself, your family, your community, and Alaska.

Thank you.

### Economic Relief

The governor has signed [Senate Bill 241](#), a measure the legislature passed on March 28, 2020, to give him tools to fight the coronavirus pandemic and provide Alaskans economic relief. The legislation:

- Extends the governor's public health disaster declaration until November 15, 2020
- Allows the governor to spend up to \$10 million in response to the pandemic from the state disaster relief fund
- Empowers the state chief medical officer to issue standing orders relating to coronavirus
- Establishes moratoriums during this health crisis on evictions, home foreclosures, vehicle repossessions, utility cut-offs due to hardship caused by coronavirus
- Allows state grants to small businesses
- Bans price-gouging
- Allows by-mail voting
- Extends state tax filing deadlines

### Budget Vetoes

The governor this week exercised his line-item veto power on the state operating and capital budget, [House Bill 205](#), and supplemental budget, [House Bill 234](#).

HB 205 mostly covers Fiscal Year 2021, the budget year that begins July 1, and HB 234 largely applies to items for the current Fiscal Year 2020 budget cycle. Both bills and [House Bill 206](#), the FY 21 mental health budget, provide **\$116.6 million** in state unrestricted general funds for **coronavirus response and relief**.

All three bills help the government function during the strain and stress of the COVID-19 pandemic. They provide a modicum of stability in these uncertain times.

[The governor's vetoes](#), based on figures provided by his office for [HB 205](#) and [HB 234](#), include:

- A [\\$1.1 billion transfer](#) from permanent fund earnings to the permanent fund corpus
- [\\$256.6 million](#) in state general funds, mostly for FY 21
  - \$100.1 million for municipal school bond debt reimbursement
  - \$36.7 million for rural school construction and repair
  - \$30 million in education grants to supplement the \$1.2 billion in education formula funding
  - \$12.5 million for the university
  - \$2.7 million for public broadcasting
  - \$500,000 for the Cold Climate Housing Research Center
- [\\$44.8 million](#) in state general funds for FY 20
  - \$30 million to capitalize the community assistance fund
  - \$14 million in Medicaid
  - \$520,300 for the Cold Climate Housing Research Center
  - \$150,000 to help rural Alaskans get Real ID licenses

[According to the Office of Management and Budget](#), the FY 21 operating and capital budget will be \$5.4 billion in state general funds, which includes \$680 million for a \$1,000 permanent fund dividend. In terms of total funds – state, federal, and other sources – the budget adds up to more than \$10 billion.

The governor says much of his cuts can be filled by federal coronavirus relief funds. This remains to be seen, so stay tuned.

### Regular Updates

Much is happening during this time of the coronavirus pandemic.

Federal stimulus checks should be heading out now. Unemployment benefits should be coming soon. Federal relief to states is expected later this month.

I'll keep you posted on this.

Until then, take heart. Hunker down. Keep your distance. Wash your hands. Stay healthy. Be grateful for those who are on the frontlines, helping all of us at risk to themselves – medics, doctors, nurses, firefighters, police, utility workers, grocery store clerks, postal workers, garbage collectors, pilots, truck drivers, fuel deliverers, federal, state, and municipal workers, and more.

And know that help is on the way.

### Click Bishop

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