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Some criminal charges in N.J. should be delayed because of coronavirus, AG tells police

By Blake Nelson

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New Jersey's attorney general asked cops Monday to consider waiting to file some criminal charges to ease the coronavirus' impact on the justice system.

People suspected of fraud and other crimes that do not "imminently" affect public safety should not necessarily be charged immediately, Gurbir Grewal wrote in a letter to law enforcement leaders. Cops should also consider not enforcing local ordinances that might limit when grocery stores could receive food or medicine, he said.

In addition, officials should consider ordering suspects to appear in court instead of immediately taking them to jail.

"I want to be absolutely clear that public safety and victim safety are always the most important factors to be considered in any charging decision," Grewal wrote.

The recommendations come after the court system suspended all new jury trials and prisons stopped allowing visitors. Some lawyers previously told NJ Advance Media that they were concerned how an unabated flow of people being arrested could affect courts and jails.

Grewal also announced that deadlines for some licenses were extended, and that some offices would no longer accept in-person meetings.

People now have 60 more days to apply to be a respiratory care practitioner or a home improvement contractor, among other professions.

In addition, the civil rights division will only accept complaints by phone or mail, and the Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control will allow face-to-face meetings just by appointment, among other changes.

The announcements came the same day Gov. Phil Murphy ordered all movie theaters, casinos and gyms to close indefinitely. Prosecutors will be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to give advice about violations of the governor's orders, the letter said.

There are now 178 positive coronavirus tests in the state.

If quarantined officers leave a department short-staffed, Grewal said towns should rely on "mutual aid agreements" with other areas to keep up patrols — similar to the pact that

allowed State Police to recently help earthquake-stricken Puerto Rico. Agencies can also rely on the hundreds of “Special Law Enforcement Officers” in the state, the letter said, who are often the cops stationed at schools.

Grewal added that they were waiting for more guidance from the corrections department and the agency that oversees incarcerated youth about how best to detain people with COVID-19 symptoms.

Prosecutors have suspended work trips and outside meetings, and Grewal recommended officers do the same.