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Trump announces N.J. travel advisory, backs off coronavirus quarantine proposal

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UPDATE: The CDC issued a domestic travel advisory on Saturday evening that urged residents of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut to refrain from non-essential domestic travel for 14 days effective immediately.

President Donald Trump announced a travel advisory for New York, New Jersey and Connecticut as the coronavirus pandemic continues to grip the region, but he backed off an earlier proposal to quarantine part of the Tri-State area.

After speaking with the states' governors, a "quarantine will not be necessary," Trump tweeted Saturday night.

More details were released soon after by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Gov. Phil Murphy said late Saturday that he was briefed on the advisory by Trump and Vice President Mike Pence.

"To be clear, this non-binding advisory guidance does not change the rules that have been established and in place for over a week now under Executive Order 107," Murphy said in a statement about the stay-at-home orders he instituted in New Jersey last Saturday. "If you have been working as part of our frontline response effort, from healthcare workers to supermarket workers, we still need you on the job."

"I encourage all New Jerseyans to continue practicing aggressive social distancing and take personal responsibility to help us get through this public health emergency," the governor added.

Murphy has ordered all New Jerseyans to stay at home except for necessary travel, banned social gatherings, and mandated that non-essential businesses in the state close until further notice to help curb the spread of the virus.

Trump floated the idea of a quarantine in the region earlier in the day, and experts told NJ Advance Media that it would have been legal.

Although the Public Health Service Act doesn't explicitly mention quarantines, that option was implied in the authority the law gave the government to protect the public from diseases, said Charles Stimson, a senior legal fellow with the Heritage Foundation.

"The governors don't have all the data that the federal government has," Stimson said, meaning presidents are often better suited to make that call.

The trick would be enforcing a statewide quarantine, said Ron Chen, a Rutgers law professor and former New Jersey Public Advocate.

“The only practical way to enforce something like that, that I can think of, is to federalize the National Guard,” Chen wrote in an email. While troops were recently given the green light to work in New Jersey, they’re planning to help run test centers and move supplies.

Will Trump really pull them off “tasks that the governors on the scene have already designated as important to combat the pandemic?” Chen asked before Trump’s evening announcement.

Congress passed its first quarantine legislation in 1878, according to the CDC, but federal officials have generally focused on international travel.

Local governments and states “have the primary authority to control the spread of dangerous diseases,” according to a 2014 report by the Congressional Research Service, a nonpartisan federal agency.

However, “the federal government has authority to quarantine and impose other health measures to prevent the spread of diseases from foreign countries and between states,” researchers wrote, rooting that power in the U.S. Constitution. The federal government may also “assist state efforts to prevent the spread of communicable diseases if requested by a state or if state efforts are inadequate to halt the spread of disease.”

The president introduced the quarantine proposal earlier Saturday.

“Some people would like to see New York quarantined because it’s a hotspot — New York, New Jersey,” Trump said. “I’m thinking about that right now. We might not have to do it, but there’s a possibility that sometime today we’ll do a quarantine — short-term, two weeks — on New York, probably New Jersey, certain parts of Connecticut.”

When asked about the president’s authority to shut down certain states, Trump’s acting chief of staff said: “We’re evaluating all the options right now.”

Rumors of a national quarantine have spread along with coronavirus cases. The National Security Council Tweeted earlier in the month to say those rumors were false.

New Jersey has at least 11,124 known cases of COVID-19, including 140 deaths. That’s the second most of any U.S. state, behind New York.

NJ Advance Media staff writers Jonathan Salant, Brent Johnson and Chris Sheldon contributed to this report.