Reopen Michigan Safely Coalition Calls on Whitmer to #EndTheOfficeBan on April 14th

New coalition of Michigan's job creators says Whitmer should update MIOSHA emergency rules to empower businesses that follow established safety protocols to reopen

LANSING, Mich., March 4, 2021 /PRNewswire/ -- In anticipation of theApril 14th expiration of Michigan Occupational Safety and Administration (MIOSHA) emergency rules that prohibit the reopening of business office spaces, the Reopen Michigan Safely coalition today called on Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to #EndTheOfficeBan and allow job creators and employees across all industries to work together toward reopening safely.

Reopen Michigan Safely is a newly formed coalition of business leaders focused on reenergizingMichigan's economy. The group was started by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, Traverse Connect, Lansing Regional Chamber of Commerce, Saginaw County Chamber of Commerce, Birmingham Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce, Battle Creek Area Chamber of Commerce and Southern Wayne County Chamber of Commerce.

The coalition is sounding the alarm that Michigan jobs are being permanently lost due to current restrictions, and is asking others to join the movement to reopen Michigan now. "It is time to safely reopen Michigan for business," said Michigan Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Rich Studley. "With the widespread distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and a substantial decrease in COVID caseloads, it is time for state government to be more proactive about saving jobs and allowing businesses to reopen. Given everything we have learned over the last year, it is time to let job creators and employees put that information to work and safely reopen our offices and other businesses."

While the coalition is pressing for a full, and safe, reopening of allMichigan businesses, a pressing issue is the rapidly approaching April 14th expiration of Whitmer's MIOSHA emergency orders that ban most in-person office work. Citing a provision under Michigan law, Whitmer initially implemented the rules for a six-month period. Now that the six months are nearly up, the Governor is weighing whether to unilaterally extend the rules for an additional six months. That decision point is approaching rapidly.

Originally signed last October, Whitmer's MIOSHA emergency rules provide extensive protocols for operating safely but prohibit most in-person work. This means businesses and employers are barred from finding ways to safely reopen offices in ways that will keep our jobs and economy alive. The rules state that, "The employer shall create a policy prohibiting in-person work for employees to the extent that their work activities can feasibly be completed remotely."

Scott Ryan, Vice President and General Counsel of Gentex, aZeeland-based company that provides custom, high-tech electronic products for the automotive, aerospace and commercial fire protection industries, said current restrictions are holding our economy back.

"Michigan's remote working requirement has curtailed new product development efforts, hampered our ability to respond to operational concerns, negatively affected our ability to compete, and left many office employees battling isolation and depression," said Ryan. "We've done the hard work to protect our employees and working together to get back to our offices safely is a major priority for us."

Members of the coalition concur and strongly encourage the governor to work with and trust job creators and employees to reopen safely.

"Offices are some of our most safe, low-risk and controllable environments," saidSaginaw County Chamber of Commerce CEO Veronica Horn. "A balanced approach to reopening Michigan would require employers to have the proper safety measures in place but then allow employers to craft plans for returning safely to the office in a way that works best for their employees, work environment and comfortability."

Michigan has one of the most crippling set of restrictions inthe United States on in-person work, with the overwhelming majority of states leaving these decisions in the hands of employers and employees, as long as they implement safety protocols. For example, while Michigan continues to restrict in-person dining in restaurants, no other state in the Midwest has such restrictions on these small businesses.

National studies suggest that employers and employees alike are eager to return to offices to increase teamwork, collaboration and innovation, while alleviating the mental stress and isolation employees have been experiencing while working from home full time.

Michigan's downtown business districts and city governments are also under great strain.

"Our downtown business districts depend on the patronage of thousands of office workers who work in our city centers every day," said Lansing Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Tim Daman. "Without them, city buildings and parking structures remain deserted and restaurants, coffee houses and shops remain closed or on the brink of bankruptcy. It is time to allow the option of reopening offices and other businesses safely."

"Many of our cities are now facing multi-million dollar budgetary shortfalls in large part due to Michigan's work from home requirements," said Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce CEO Rick Baker. "The effects of employees staying home have caused once-vibrant downtowns and urban areas to lose businesses and jobs. It's time to change course."

"Our restaurants and retail establishments have suffered greatly as a result of the current work from-home mandates, and further extending the order will lead directly to more local businesses failing," said Birmingham-Bloomfield Chamber President Joe Bauman. "Many of our member businesses have greatly reduced staff and slashed their hours of operation as a result of losing all of the customers generated from a robust office sector and are literally hanging on by a thread. Our employers and employees should be given the right to create a safe work environment following federal guidelines and determine for themselves what is the best operating practice for their individual business."

"As we carefully and cautiously consider a reentry to the workplace, we can move from "stay safe, stay healthy and stay home" to "stay together for a solution," said Battle Creek Area Chamber of Commerce President Kara Beer. "We are eagerly advocating for a clear plan to bring back our workforces to the office for in-person work safely, increase teamwork, collaboration and innovation all while reducing the mental stress and isolation employees have been experiencing for the past year working from home."

"Along with our friends from around the state, Down river's employers, entrepreneurs, residents, and workforce have experienced tremendous pain and challenges that have come with the onset of the ongoing pandemic and uncertain economic times," commented Southern Wayne County Regional Chamber president/CEO Ronald J. Hinrichs. "Although we applaud the Administration for their early and ongoing efforts to keep us all safe from COVID-19, the current remote work policy required for most of our state's visionaries, doers, and community investors is having a lasting and detrimental impact that is disastrous to the livelihood, mental health, and ability for all to prosper and thrive.

"We must all work together in a united and dynamic way to safely and effectively reopen economic activity that will drive growth and opportunity in our communities, and ensure a prosperous and healthy environment for our citizens and the generations that will follow.

Effective distribution of vaccines, coincided with safely reopening our workplaces, and allowing caring and committed business leaders and talent to work hand in hand with our elected leadership to move our State forward is essential. As one united community of Michiganders, together we will get this done," Hinrichs concluded.

"Northern Michigan runs on small businesses in diverse industries, and all play an integral role in our economic recovery. Every kind of business, from retail to office, should have the ability to open and operate with the proper safety protocol in place," said Warren Call, president & CEO of Traverse Connect.

Learn more
The Reopen Michigan Safely coalition can be found online at www.ReopenMichiganSafely.com, on Facebook at facebook.com/reopenmichigansafely and Twitter at @ReopenMISafely.



SOURCE Michigan Chamber of Commerce

For further information: Wendy Block, (517) 371-7678

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