

Is it Time to Reopen Indianapolis Area Mosques?

Guidance in Brief

This guidance seeks to advise Indianapolis mosque leaders on how best to resume congregational services safely from a medical perspective.

Indiana is in Stage 3 of the [reopening plan](#), which allows many businesses and organizations to open with proper social distancing and health precautions. Reopening plans in the state, and nationally, are motivated primarily by limiting the economic impact of the disease while avoiding a situation where the healthcare system is overwhelmed. With no treatment or vaccine, governments resigned to the fact that many people will be infected, and a small fraction of them will undoubtedly perish. Although we do know that extreme social distancing rules are effective in slowing the spread of the disease, little is known about the relative effectiveness of less strict rules that are being implemented in the Indiana stages of reopening. Only time will tell what works and what doesn't.

The vast majority of mosques in the Indianapolis area remain closed for all congregational prayers. The goal of religious organization in considering reopening is **NOT THE SAME** as that of public policy makers. We can, and should, attempt to limit the risk of transmission to a minimum, as it is the primary way to reduce the risk of death from COVID-19. Mosques should weigh the benefits of opening up congregational services, which are not as strong of a priority compared to preserving life from Sharia perspective, against the risk that one or more congregants contract the Coronavirus while in congregation and be faced with death, or transmitting the disease to high-risk individuals they are in touch with resulting in their death. Given the uncertainty of effectiveness of relaxed social distancing measures and precautions, we generally recommend significant caution in reopening mosques, and to lag behind the state stages by at least 1-2 months while we learn what works and what doesn't.

The Medical Advisory Panel of Indianapolis healthcare professional recommends:

- High-risk individuals should avoid praying in congregation, and should continue to pray at home.
- restarting in two stages
 - **Stage 1:**
 - Starts immediately.
 - Very limited congregations starting with up to 10 low risk individuals progressively increasing weekly up to the maximum recommended by the state, **conducted outdoors** or very well-ventilated environment, up to 10 minutes maximum, limited to some or all of daily prayers but not Jumaa, with 6+ feet between congregants, facemask use, and common-sense hygiene procedures and precautions. Since most masajid are not equipped with high capacity ventilation system, it is recommended that congregations are limited to outdoor settings at this stage. More details below.

- **Stage 2:**
 - Starts at least 2 weeks after Stage 1 (Mid-June), and only if
 - the conditions in the city of Indianapolis remain similar to current state of stable or slowly decreasing new cases, decreasing mortality rates, test positive rates, and adequate healthcare capacity remain similar to what they are nowadays.
 - No new evidence suggesting that the risk of indoor gatherings (in gyms, businesses...etc.) cannot be adequately mitigated with currently recommended precautions of social distancing, basic hygiene precautions and masks.
 - Congregations can move indoors, maintaining the same precautions mentioned in Stage 1, and improving ventilation as much as possible (more details below). Jumaa service can resume as long as the size limits and other precautions can be maintained. Consider starting with small numbers and slowly growing to ensure the precautions are followed. Mosques with very small area and/or poor ventilation should consider continuing their congregations outdoors.

Mosques should stock up as soon as possible with disinfectants, cleaning supplies, hand sanitizers, and masks. Due to high demand, these items could take weeks to procure.

Justification and Detailed Guidance

Background and Where We Stand Today

Indiana state managed to flatten the curve. New cases range between 300 and 700 daily, and saw slight decrease in the past weeks, but remains largely stable. The healthcare system seems to have adequate capacity at this time to cover COVID-19 patients. Governor Holcomb initiated the sequential reopening plan. We are in Stage 3 now, when more businesses and gyms can operate at reduced capacity, and gatherings of up to 100 individuals are allowed (as long as social distancing and sanitation precautions can be ensured). Working remotely remains to be encouraged if possible, and places of worship are still encouraged to conduct services remotely as possible.

What is the risk, and what factors affect the risk level?

In writing this guidance, the primary risk we attempt to control is **the risk of death from COVID-19**. The mortality rate of COVID-19 is significantly higher than the flu, and is especially high for older patients (starts increasing above 50 years) and in the presence of chronic health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, and obesity. Congregants in mosques have this risk directly to themselves, and to those they could expose in their households.

Controllable Factors

Factors mosque leaders have the power to manage/modify include:

1. Location for congregation. Outdoors is much safer than indoors/closed areas due to better ventilation and bigger space.
2. Density. The number of congregants relative to the space; the smaller the better.
3. Distance. The farther congregants are from each other the better; minimum of 6 feet. The safe distance requirement is a function of ventilation and duration of time in the space. In a closed room, where ventilation may not be ideal, it will not take long for infectious particles to travel farther from an infected person, and the 6-foot distance will no longer be adequate.
4. Duration of exposure.
5. Frequency of disinfecting commonly touched surfaces
6. Use of face masks
7. Enforcement mechanism for maintaining precaution procedures

Uncontrollable Factors

Uncertainties about the spread of the disease and the ability of the healthcare system to respond are beyond the control of mosque leaders, including:

1. Prevalence (how many active COVID-19 patients) in the region the mosque resides in, especially in relation to how good testing is
2. Rate of change of new cases
3. Available hospital and ICU beds
4. Available ventilators in regional hospitals

How can mosque leaders minimize the risk to their congregations?

We recommend that reopening mosques occurs in 2 stages.

Stage 1

This stage is intended to start safely, and monitor the prevalence of the disease in the region and effectiveness of relaxed precautions before expanding. This stage can start immediately.

The following are the precautions necessary to limit the risk:

1. Pray outdoors. Indoor prayers even with small groups is yet to be proven safe, and is a function of many factors as mentioned above. Mosques are uncommonly prepared for maintaining a low risk level, especially regarding ventilation systems. Thus, we recommend outdoor prayers at this time while we collect more information. Outdoor areas can be prepared/designated for prayers with floor covering and possibly tents. This option is possible now because of the weather.
2. Control numbers and density. Limit numbers to 10 initially, and expand in weekly increments, to no larger than the state limit of gathering or the number that would consistent with the distancing rules below, whichever is smaller. Implementing an online registration system or messaging system to coordinate congregants can help. Groups larger than the number limit can pray in sequence by breaking into smaller groups that are below the recommended number. If multiple groups are praying, make sure to follow disinfection routines, and allow 30 minutes between groups to clear the air.
3. It is advisable to avoid Jumaa prayers at this time as it will be much more difficult to control the size of the group, and limit congregations to daily prayers. As the size increases, Jumaa prayer can be introduced if size control is confirmed effective.
4. Common sense hygiene precautions:
 - a. Congregants bring their own prayer rugs and masks
 - b. Mandate no wudu in mosques, as wudu areas are small, involve frequent touching of faucets and are not conducive of distancing norms
 - c. Congregants to use hand sanitizers, preferably provided by the mosque, before and after the prayer
 - d. Disinfect prayer area after each prayer. Pay special attention to frequently touched surfaces.
5. Although the preference should be that congregants bring their own masks, mosque leaders should make arrangements to provide masks in case congregants do not come prepared. No one without masks should be allowed to pray in congregation.
6. Check for symptoms at entry point, including temperature. No one with temperature above 99.5 or any COVID-19 symptoms in the past 14 days should be allowed. The symptoms include: Cough, fever, trouble breathing, chest pain, fatigue, loss of taste and smell, diarrhea.
7. Congregants in high risk group should not attend (see below for high risk group). Congregants with household members in the high-risk group should also be discouraged from attending.
8. Prepare the prayer area with markings on the floor designating 6-foot distance between congregants in a line, and between lines.
9. Limit duration of the congregation. Make sure total prayer and gathering time does NOT exceed 10 minutes. No one should arrive early, or wait after prayer. Congregants can wait in cars until the time of the prayer, and leave immediately after prayer.

10. Imam should wear a mask, and be more distant than the congregants in loud recitation prayers. We recommend 12 feet distance from the imam for these prayers.
11. Leave in an orderly manner making sure there is at least 6 feet of space between congregants, preferably leaving from an area different than the entrance
12. Mosque leadership should arrange for ushers who will perform the controls above and ensure compliance with the rules. At any time if compliance was not effective, congregations should be stopped until remediation is restored.

Stage 2

Starts at least 2 weeks after Stage 1 (Mid-June), and only if:

- the conditions in the city of Indianapolis remain similar to current state of stable or slowly decreasing new cases, decreasing mortality rates, test positive rates, and adequate healthcare capacity remain similar to what they are nowadays.
- No new evidence suggesting that the risk of indoor gatherings (in gyms, businesses...etc.) cannot be adequately mitigated with currently recommended precautions of social distancing, basic hygiene precautions and masks.
- The mosque is generally well ventilated, and is large enough to allow for social distancing. Mosques with very small area and/or poor ventilation should consider continuing their congregations outdoors.

The following are the precautions necessary to limit the risk in this stage (subject to evidence-based modifications):

1. Congregations indoors can resume.
2. Maximize the ventilation of the indoor areas. This can be achieved by opening windows and doors (if safe to do so), and increasing circulation of outside air (consult HVAC professionals). Consider installing high-volume exhaust fans or air filtration systems. More details can be found at the [CDC site on office buildings](#).
3. Follow the recommendations #2-12 mentioned above in Stage 1.

High Risk Individuals

These individuals should NOT come to mosques, and should pray at home given significant risk to their own health, their household or to that of other congregants:

- Age less than 15 and more than 60.
- Compromised immune system.
- Any symptoms of fever, sore throat, chest pain, cough, nausea, diarrhea, loss of appetite, fatigue, body aches.
- COVID-19 positive test. Follow CDC guidelines for re-entry once COVID-19 positive to know when restrictions can be ended.
- Living in the same household with someone with above symptoms or with known COVID-19 exposure.
- Exposure to a COVID-19 patient without appropriate personal protective equipment in the past 14 days.

Supplies

Mosques should stock up as soon as possible with disinfectants, cleaning supplies, hand sanitizers, and masks. Due to high demand, these items could take weeks to procure.

Attending to the Spiritual Needs and Mental Wellness of the Community

The Coronavirus pandemic introduces many new stresses to practically everyone's life. It is in such times that people need spiritual uplifting. Unfortunately, it is the same time that such uplifting is not possible through normal means of prayers in congregations, and human connections. The WHO has sounded the alarm of a mental health crisis.

We recommend that each community continue to engage their congregations regularly in whatever means possible (webinars, video conferencing, ...etc.), and attend to the needs of the vulnerable, dispossessed and those suffering financial difficulties. Proactively assessing the needs is critically important. Finally, communities should connect with mental wellness professionals and experts.

How can individuals minimize the risk to themselves and their loved ones?

Mosque leaders can encourage risk-minimizing behaviors in their communities. These rules can be posted outside the mosque and shared on a frequent, perhaps weekly basis with the congregants to serve as a reminder.

- Be a responsible model citizen. Your actions can save someone's life. Your lack of attention to these details can cause spread of the disease ultimately leading to someone's ill health or even death
- Your goal is to protect others and to protect yourself.
- Do not come if you fall in high risk category as detailed above
- If there is a remote chance that you may be sick, please do not take any chances and pray at home
- When you decide to come, co-ordinate with your mosque using their pre-registration or messaging app. If your mosque has fewer available slots than potential attendees, consider alternating prayers that you attend.
- Check your temperature at home and do not come if it is more than 99.5
- Do Wudu at home
- Bring your prayer rug
- Place your prayer rug at marked slots and make sure they are 6 feet from other congregants both on the side and in front and behind you
- Bring your mask and wear it all the time before entering masjid until after exiting masjid and sitting back in your vehicle
- Use hand sanitizer before and after entry into mosque
- Do not socialize and chat with others once done. Leave as soon as possible
- Enter and leave in orderly manner, keeping 6 feet distance at all times.
- If you have to wait outside the mosque, make sure you keep 6 feet distance from others. It is preferable that you wait in your car.
- Once you are back home, wash your hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds.

Committee Members

We sincerely pray to Allah (SWT) to lift this trial, keep us patient through it and make it a source of increasing ranks for all Muslims. We also pray to Allah (SWT) to keep everyone safe and give shifa to those who are sick. Lastly, we pray to Him to guide the members of this committee and forgive our mistakes as we make our humble attempts to formulate these guidelines. Ameen.

Dr. Nadeem Ikhlaqee

Dr. Shamaila Waseem

Dr. Faisal Khan

Dr. Sakib Khalid

Dr. Rahila Qazi

Dr. Mohammad Alhaddad

Dr. Sarfraz Ahmed

Dr. Waqar Mahmood

Dr. Eyas Raddad