

Governor's Address to the People of Arkansas

7 p.m. December 10, 2020

Good evening fellow Arkansans,

Tonight I am speaking from the Governor's office in our state Capitol.

Almost 20 years ago, I was part of our nation's response to the terrorist attack on September 11. We all remember the horror and heartache of that day when we lost over 3,000 Americans. But even as we witnessed tragedy that fateful day, we were awestruck and inspired by the heroic efforts of our firefighters and first responders as they went into burning buildings to save lives.

Today, our nation faces another deadly crisis. It is a global pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than 280,000 nationwide, and just in Arkansas, the virus has taken the lives of over 2,800 of our neighbors, friends, co-workers, and loved ones.

Let's put this in perspective. Right now, this virus is one of the leading causes of death in Arkansas. But it is even more personal. Many of us have lost someone we care about. I have made the difficult call to express condolences to the families of some of those we have lost. Those calls were to the loved ones of an educator, a state employee, and a police officer. Last weekend, I called Jennifer Kennemore of Osceola who lost her husband,

Dickie, to the virus. He was a former Mayor of Osceola; he was a friend of mine; and he helped bring Big River Steel to Arkansas. He died after multiple weeks in the hospital. He fought hard but couldn't make it and will be missed. That story of suffering and loss has been told too often.

And just as we had heroes after 9/11, we have heroes today. It is the courageous work of our health care professionals and emergency responders who each day put their own lives at risk to save others. As I speak tonight, we have nurses, doctors, and staff in our hospitals and long-term care facilities who have looked death in the eye for nine months, and they have not wavered in their commitment and determination to beat the virus one human being at a time.

Others have lost their business; some have lost their job and income; and early on, some did not get to say good-bye to a loved one because of COVID restrictions. In one way or another, this virus has impacted us all. But we have squared our jaw and faced the adversity. We have met the challenge just as those who have gone before us confronted the tough times of life. And we all have hope for a better day ahead.

Nine months ago, we had no ability to test for COVID-19 in our state. But now, we are testing on average more than 10,000 Arkansans every day. In fact, I asked the Department of Health to run the numbers for the

individual Arkansans who have received a COVID test. I was informed that 1.3 million individuals in our state have been tested. These are not repeat tests but tests of specific different individuals. Our state has a little over 3 million people in population, so we have tested more than 40 percent of all Arkansans.

Whether in testing, data analysis, hospital coordination, or compliance with guidelines, we have made progress every day.

Tonight, Arkansas is at another critical moment in this struggle to turn the tide of the pandemic. Today, we are two weeks past Thanksgiving, and we are seeing a surge in coronavirus cases. This spike in cases was predicted by our health officials and is the result of everything we did over Thanksgiving -- even with the best of intentions. We are also two weeks away from Christmas, and unless we take the right precautions, science tells us the cases will continue to rapidly accelerate. We do not want to have a triple surge.

As we look to the future, my hope is that all Arkansans will celebrate this special season of the year. In fact, I hope our holiday lights are brighter and more beautiful than ever. But we must do a few things differently this year. If we fail to follow our public health guidelines over the next two weeks and through the New Year, then our hospital staff will be challenged

like never before. Let me emphasize that our hospitals are doing an amazing job of coordination, developing surge capacity, and maximizing ICU bed space. Even with this, I was informed today in Jonesboro that crowded hospitals lead to backed-up emergency rooms, and backed-up emergency rooms lead to ambulances waiting in line. And when ambulances wait in line at the emergency center, then the first responders may not be able to respond to a 9-1-1 emergency call as quickly.

We have all seen the television images of El Paso, New York, New Orleans, and other cities where the hospitals are overflowing, and patients are in field hospitals or hallways. We don't want that reality to hit Arkansas.

There are already calls for lock-down orders and directives to shelter in place. This is not my vision of a good Christmas or a good way to start the New Year. And most importantly, there are better solutions.

So, what do we need to do?

A couple of suggestions for the holidays. First, be smart about travel. Let's travel less but in some cases it will be necessary. I remember hitchhiking home for Christmas from college one year. Mom was worried, and it didn't make much sense. But I did it anyway. Let's use more sense this Christmas, and everyone will understand and probably enjoy a more

quiet and peaceful holiday. But if you do travel out of state, then consider getting a rapid test before and after you travel.

Remember, this virus is highly contagious. When you are indoors without social distancing or when you are not wearing a mask, you then increase significantly the opportunity for the virus to spread. And older individuals have a greater risk of hospitalization and death if they contract the virus. Someone who is over 65 is five times more likely to be hospitalized and over 90 times more likely to die as compared to a young adult. So while we might not have any symptoms ourselves, we could still be carrying the virus and give it to someone who is older and much more vulnerable.

Also, let's innovate and be creative about the holidays. I loved the idea of one family from Little Rock who said they were having their Christmas outside. They were going to have a firepit and do everything outdoors. Not a bad idea; but you may have a better idea. Figure out what we can do to have a meaningful holiday, and yet let's not be the reason the virus spreads.

Let me assure you that to those of the Christian faith. I have confidence, Christ will understand a little deviation from the norm this

year. And for our Jewish community or other faiths, the greatest joy would be the gift of safety to all the family.

And for our business and employer community, we might forego the holiday party for this year; or you can have your social distancing get together approved by the Department of Health. That is what my office is doing.

Now some of you are saying, why don't you just put more restrictions on our businesses or close down restaurants, gyms, hair salons, and barbershops. Of course, these are all small businesses that are already under very strict guidelines.

We are consistently watching the data and making decisions based upon what will mitigate the spread of the virus. We are limiting seating capacity in indoor and outdoor venues. We have issued numerous fines to the small percent of businesses that have failed to comply with the COVID guidelines. We have a mask mandate in place, and we have asked local law enforcement to educate and enforce the wearing of mask when social distancing is not possible.

This week I was in Benton, and the local leaders talked about the high percentage of people wearing a face mask. But I was greeted by a few who believed the mask does not make any difference. My response is that I have

to be guided by the science and medical experts who say the mask is our principal defense and the best way to keep businesses open. This is not the time to dismiss the advice of scientists and public health professionals.

Now is the time to rally around each other and show grace in times of need.

Of course, if you are in your car on the road or on a tractor by yourself on the farm, then no one is asking you to wear a mask. But otherwise, please do the safest thing.

The real solution to getting life back to normal is people being self-disciplined by wearing a mask, socially distancing, and limiting our indoor gatherings to those we know are safe. Those are the steps that will make a difference versus putting additional restrictions on businesses that are already complying with all the health guidance and when there are no cases coming from a specific place.

And if we find there are cases arising from a particular business, then we will take action.

But more restrictions on businesses would add a whole host of additional challenges from increased unemployment to closed businesses and bankruptcies. All right during the holiday season.

Others say we should close schools. Let me read a letter from Rain Glover from Conway who is in the third grade.

“My mom is a nightshift nurse so that means she has to sleep during the day and ... and so she can’t help me with home school. ... My dad works during the day, so he can’t help me either. I hope you know how important it is for kids like my sister and me to be able to go to school. So can’t you find a way to keep school open. Kids shouldn’t fall behind. Lots of kids will be in the same situation.”

Thank you, Rain Glover, for making the case for school, and I agree with you. We do have to pivot to virtual school as needed; but our teachers understand there is no substitute for providing school in person as consistently and safely as we can.

I first declared a public health emergency on March 11 -- nine months ago. This allows emergency use of telemedicine; flexible education in K-12; and many other emergency actions needed during this pandemic. The latest emergency declaration expires in two days. Today, I am declaring a continuation of the emergency through the end of December. During this pandemic, the General Assembly has been a good partner. Legislators have answered the call in appropriating money for struggling businesses; for our hospitals; for rental assistance; for food banks; enhanced unemployment compensation; and our testing and contact tracing demands.

But some have argued that the legislature should join in the decision to continue the emergency. Today, I am asking the General Assembly to conduct a meeting as a Committee of the Whole to support and affirm the current public emergency. We are all in this fight together and it takes all of us -- arm in arm -- united to defeat the biggest public health crisis in our lifetime.

The best athletes in sports are inspired by two things; they are motivated by their teammates and winning. In football, you want a running back who can smell the goal line and get there; in track, you need a runner who has the extra kick of energy when they get to the final stretch and see the tape. But the athletes who care about their teammates and want to do all they can for the team contribute even more to the victory. To my friends across the state, we are teammates. From the young people who understand what is required to protect their grandparents; to those in nursing homes or assisted living, you have been troupers throughout this year; to the essential workers who provide our food, energy, transportation, and health care every day. To the teachers in the classroom, and to our state workers who get the job done under pressure. Together we will get to the finish line.

You inspire me, and you encourage others. Our nation has always come together during times of crises and emergencies. When people understand what is necessary and the public good [is] at stake, they always rally and come together. Arkansans have answered the call in every war, in every national challenge. Today, we are in the midst of a pandemic, and we need every Arkansan to be on the team.

Thank you. God bless you, and may God have His special blessing on the people of Arkansas.

Good night.