Northam delays decision on mask requirements, until after holiday weekend

A customer at Home Depot on Thursday in Reston. (Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg News)

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam said Friday that he would not announce a statewide policy on mask use until next week — leaving the public without firm directives over the Memorial Day weekend, when many are expected to take advantage of fine weather to congregate in public places after months of quarantine.

Northam (D), a physician, has encouraged but not required Virginians to wear face coverings in public. But the question of whether he should require them to do so has become urgent as parts of the state reopen and more people leave their homes. Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney (D) and two union leaders on Friday urged Northam to mandate mask-wearing in public and at businesses.

The governor said at a news conference that his staff would be “working through the policy over the next couple days” to ensure people have access to masks and consider how best to enforce a policy. He said he would make an announcement Tuesday.

Stoney noted in a letter to the governor that more customers at a grocery store in Richmond’s East End shopped without masks in the past week as Northam eased some quarantine restrictions for much of the state. Richmond, like hard-hit Northern Virginia and Accomack County on the Eastern Shore, has delayed
reopening. “As the nation’s only doctor governor, I know that you understand that this is not the time for us to let down our guard,” Stoney wrote.

Two union leaders made a similar appeal Friday morning during a Facebook Live event arranged by the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy. They asked the governor to require Virginians to wear masks inside businesses.

“We don’t need recommendations. We didn’t elect anyone to give us recommendations,” said Dyana Forester, director of political affairs for United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400. “We elected you to put legislation, to put measures in place to protect our workers, to protect us.”

Forester and Doris Crouse-Mays, president of the Virginia AFL-CIO, asked for the mask mandate as part of a larger set of worker protections. They urged those following the Facebook Live event to sign a petition demanding that Northam require employers to provide paid sick and quarantine leave, on-the-job personal protective equipment, rapid and free coronavirus testing and whistleblower protections, among other things.

“Our members, the workers, are really putting their lives on the front line right now,” Forester said. “Some of us have the luxury right now to work from home and to keep work going. But remember the ones that don’t.”

Northam dropped hints Friday of what his announcement next week might entail. “Make plans for you and other family members to have facial protection,” he said.

By Laura Vozzella