

Statement:

While the efforts of the IATF and the One Hospital Command to address the COVID 19 pandemic have successfully increased and improved current hospital capacity, there is now an urgent need to reopen the economy, particularly in the NCR. We need to get out of this recession, revive businesses, and decrease unemployment, so people can support their families and communities. The economic empowerment of Filipinos translates to their health and welfare.

However, we cannot revitalize the economy without increasing public transport capacity, which has been operating at only 20-30% of pre-pandemic levels due to fears of outbreaks arising out of congested public transport spaces.

We write this statement as a panel of doctors from diverse backgrounds, all with the intention of seeing the country back on its feet. What is outlined below was presented today, September 14, 2020, Monday, to the IATF as part of a more comprehensive set of recommendations to aid the country in reviving the economy while adhering to proper public health standards.

Our position is that we can double or even triple our current public transport capacity without compromising public health, by relaxing social distancing rules, particularly in trains, buses, and jeeps, while strictly implementing and enforcing a set of proper health measures we call the 7 Commandments:

Appropriate physical distancing

Wearing of proper face masks

Wearing of face shields

No talking and no eating

Adequate ventilation

Proper disinfection

No symptomatic passengers

These 7 Commandments need to be strictly enforced and independently monitored in their implementation. We believe that while we

should also be increasing vehicles in operation and looking at proposals such as service contracting, no other single measure can more quickly ramp up capacity urgently without further significant cost.

The WHO recommends keeping a distance of 1m from other passengers to the extent possible, but allows for adjustments based on context. In applying these interventions, we propose the gradual reduction of the current 1m physical distancing norm to 0.5m. In reducing the physical distancing norm, this would double passenger capacity, but more critically the viability of operating the public transport system. Based on our review of related literature and current policies being implemented in neighboring countries like Japan and Singapore, we believe the evidence shows physical distancing can be maintained below 1m while minimally increasing the risk of infection.

A study from Duke University for example, shows that surgical masks reduce droplet transmission by up to 99%, and that the simple act of not talking can reduce droplet counts by up to 4x. At the same time, a meta-analysis from the Lancet shows that face masks and face shields can independently reduce the chance of viral transmission by up to 5-fold and 3-fold, respectively. This is how in Japan for example, passengers are now able to sit side-by-side in trains, while their COVID cases continue to decline.

To be clear, there are many more layers to our proposal and the studies we are reviewing. Public policy has no quick-and-easy solutions, and addressing the transport crisis in this pandemic is no exception. Where possible, we would like to engage in further dialogue with the IATF about our proposal and thoughts on the matter, as well as work towards full institutionalization of private sector expert consultation to further improve our overall management of the economy and public health.

We believe the comparative toll on Filipinos from a further prolonged recession is much more devastating than the minimal risks our plan puts forth. We believe that there is a way forward that delicately balances a careful reopening of public transport capacity with public health; while allowing purposeful flexibility to re-adjust measures based on actual and evolving data from the ground.

The success of this plan rests on the proper implementation of these measures, as well as the proper education and cooperation of the public to comply with the above guidelines. It is our hope that by working together, these 7 Commandments can become the new normal, and that we can achieve a breakthrough in getting our economy and people's lives back on track.

Respectfully,

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Thank you,

Liezl Mendigo