

## HEALTH CARE

### Places of worship 'may not be safe' for some, Birx says

Dr. Birx's comments came on the first Sunday after Trump labeled the nation's churches, temples and other places of worship "essential" and demanded that they reopen nationwide.



Dr. Deborah Birx. | Evan Vucci/AP Photo

By **ELEANOR MUELLER**

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Places of worship "may not be safe for those with preexisting conditions" despite orders from President Donald Trump that they be allowed to reopen immediately, White House coronavirus coordinator Deborah Birx said Sunday.

"Although it may be safe for some to go to churches and social distance, it may not be safe for those with preexisting conditions," Birx told Chris Wallace on "Fox News Sunday." "That's why in 'phase one' and 'phase two,' we've asked for those individuals with vulnerabilities to really ensure that they are protected and sheltering in place while we open up America."

Birx's comments came on the first Sunday after Trump labeled the nation's churches, temples and other places of worship "essential" and [demanded that they reopen](#) nationwide despite still-rising coronavirus cases and [several reports](#) of the [illness spreading](#) among congregants.

Trump on Friday emphasized he was instructing governors to allow places of worship to resume operations "right now" and warned that "if there's any question, they're going to have to call me — but they are not going to be successful in that call."

Asked about the wisdom of such a move in the face of warnings from public health experts, Birx pointed to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance](#) that directed faith leaders how to "reopen safely."

"Before the president made that announcement, he asked the CDC to get their guidance to churches up, so that churches could reopen safely, so that guidance is up there and available to all churches and congregants to understand how to worship together safely," Birx said Sunday on ABC's "This Week." "Certainly worshipping outside, maintaining social distancing, and you know, honestly not having physical contact with each other and that's — I know that's difficult."

"But the guidance was up before the churches were asked to reopen, and I think that's really important."

Republicans have seized on Trump's call to reopen shuttered places of worship.

"We have a right to worship," Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union," as he repeatedly invoked the Bill of Rights. "Absolutely do I feel comfortable going to church."

Asked on "Fox News Sunday" about reports of Memorial Day weekend crowds, Birx replied that she is "very concerned when people go out and don't maintain social distancing."

"And out of respect for each other, as Americans that care for each other, we need to be wearing masks in public when we cannot social distance," she said.

Asked whether Trump should wear a mask when he himself is unable to social distance, Birx responded: "The president did wear a mask when he was less than six feet." There have been several reports of [the president declining to cover his face](#) when visiting states and hosting leaders.

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