

HEALTH CARE

With social distance safety warnings, Birx tempers Trump's reopening message

The task force leader urged people to be more active and social over Memorial Day — but from six feet away.



White House coronavirus response coordinator Deborah Birx speaks during a news briefing at the White House on Friday. | Alex Wong/Getty Images

By **SUSANNAH LUTHI**

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White House coronavirus coordinator Deborah Birx told Americans they can start venturing out more Memorial Day weekend, but stressed public health precautions and social distancing measures — a message that seemed at odds with President Donald Trump's upbeat tone on normalizing the economy and immediately reopening all houses of worship.

"There are a lot of healthy people that look healthy with Covid," Birx said Friday, adding: "You can go to the beaches if you stay six feet apart. But remember that is your space, and that is the space you need to protect to ensure you are socially distancing for others."

Birx repeatedly urged people to only use their own marked tennis balls, avoid touching golf flags, and to under no circumstances share utensils at a meal. She made it clear that the U.S. isn't out of the woods yet, noting a spike in cases in cities such as Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., which have been under lockdown for months.

Trump called an unexpected press conference to announce he was [ordering churches, mosques and synagogues open this weekend](#) — and promptly left without taking questions. Birx, who hasn't appeared at a White House press briefing in weeks, remained to deliver her public health plea — including caution about attending religious services in communities that still have outbreaks.

"If there is a heightened number of Covid cases, maybe they wait another week," Birx said of religious attendance. "If there is a high number, there is a way to social distance, as you are here, in places of social worship."

To emphasize the need to maintain precautions, Birx during a brief slideshow presentation discussed data showing how outbreaks started in meatpacking plants, group housing and social gatherings.

"When you go out for this weekend, Memorial Day, and you want to do some kind of social gathering, it is important to maintain that six feet of distance,

and to have your mask with you in case a six-foot difference cannot be maintained," she said.

The White House task force's daily briefings stopped weeks ago, around the time the administration's stay-at-home guidelines expired in late April. Since then, Trump has mostly appeared with economic advisers, not public health experts, and the messaging has been about reopening the country.

After Birx left the briefing podium, White House press secretary Kaleigh McEnany took her place and got in a testy exchange with reporters over Trump's order for houses of worship to reopen.

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