Supporting Increase of Mass Gathering limits for Catering Halls

August 5, 2020

Hon. Andrew Cuomo
NYS Governor
NYS Capital Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

We would like you to consider allowing licensed foodservice establishments to operate with slightly greater capacity than the current limit of 50 guests per social gathering. Given the national increase in COVID-19 cases, this may seem counterintuitive, but we have seen direct evidence that constituents in our townships are holding backyard events in lieu of their scheduled events at our local catering halls.

We believe that a hard number could be established by your health professionals involving a certain percentage of indoor capacity based on the total occupancy. For example, if a catering facility has a capacity of 200 people then maybe use the 50% rule for 100 people.

Parties taking place in private homes can present a larger risk to public health, as most homeowners will not enforce COVID-19 guidelines as they pertain to face coverings, social distancing, contact tracing, enhanced sanitation practices and restroom facility availability. Private event facilities must legally follow all of the same guidelines as restaurants and have well-thought-out plans in place to enforce them.

We have heard from many caterers in Suffolk County who tell us that their wedding couples are holding their already-rescheduled weddings this fall no matter what, as all weddings were cancelled for the spring season. The majority of these couples are not willing to reschedule again, and if the event facility holding their deposit cannot host their wedding to their liking due to a legally-modified format, they are demanding refunds to host the event at a non-licensed premise instead, such as a private yard.

Although the public health concern is a primary theme of this letter, it is also critical to understand the immense financial strain being imposed on the wedding industry right now, and how important this industry is to our local economy. We fear that if we cannot find a way for these businesses to reopen to reasonable capacity limits in a safe way, the industry may not be there when we are fully past the pandemic.

Caterers we have spoken with are requesting to operate with 100 guests indoors, or 150 guests outdoors. Some are willing to do all outdoor events with a 100-guest limit. The current 50-guest
limit is less than our neighboring counties in Connecticut and New Jersey. If the limit was raised to at least 100 guests, the industry would have a chance to better regulate the thousands of weddings about to take place this fall. Your enforcement mechanism via the State Liquor Authority is more than adequate to convince a facility to follow the rules or lose its liquor license.

We ask that you consider expanding the capacity limits of social gatherings hosted at licensed foodservice establishments, while keeping the 50-person limit in place for events hosted at homes or other non-licensed locations. We do not want to see an increase of cases due to unsanctioned and unregulated backyard events this fall. As always, thank you for your consideration.
Sincerely,

Rich Schaffer  
Supervisor, Town of Babylon  
Chair, Suffolk County Supervisors Association

Chad A. Lupinacci  
Supervisor, Town of Huntington

Angie Carpenter  
Supervisor, Town of Islip

Edward R. Wehrheim  
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Supervisor, Town of East Hampton

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Supervisor, Town of Shelter Island