April 7, 2020

Dear Governor Whitmer,

As the Health Officers of the Northern Michigan Public Health Alliance, representing 7 local Health Departments and 31 Counties in northern lower Michigan, we would like to first express our sincere appreciation for the steadfast work you are doing to protect our state and our residents during this unprecedented crisis. Your swift action in issuing several Executive Orders designed to reduce movement and protect Michiganders created consistency across the state and also alleviated the local burden of having to issue several orders individually. We support Stay Home, Stay Safe, Save Lives and are doing all we can to promote compliance and protect the health of our residents in northern Michigan. We want to ask your assistance in one area of rising concern in northern Michigan. In many of our counties we have received reports that short term vacation rentals are being promoted, advertised, and occupied. It is clearly understood that under Executive Order 2020-21 Michigan residents are allowed to travel between multiple residences. We are working hard to ensure these part-time residents are aware of local resources that can help them to stay home when they return to our area as well as to ensure they have access to health resources.

The issue of short-term rentals and leisure occupancy in local hotels and resorts present a different matter. Rental management companies such as Michigan Rentals by Owner are promoting discounted prices for advertising vacation rentals. We are receiving reports of local ads advertising available vacation rentals that sleep as many as 12-24 people. Each weekend we are noticing increased traffic and increased occupancy in seasonal cabins and homes. Local authorities are also reporting concerns regarding young people congregating on local beaches, parks, and trails. Some of our local municipalities have issued ordinances limiting or banning short term vacation rentals as well.

We care about all our residents, full-time and part-time, as well as the tourism trade that supports our communities. However, we have grave concerns about the potential impact of a population surge in northern Michigan on the healthcare infrastructure. We also understand that short term rentals may serve a very important purpose in preparing to house medical staff, potentially serving as quarantine sites, or housing people who are assisting elderly or otherwise compromised family members. However, we fear that the increased traffic noticed in many parts of northern Michigan over the past two weekends is not for these reasons and in fact may indicate that people are traveling for leisure. People may feel that by retreating to their northern sanctuaries they are safe from COVID-19, but we know that there is growing community spread as well as limited testing capacity to identify those who are positive in northern Michigan. We do not believe this activity complies with Executive Order 2020-21 and may risk strain on our already fragile healthcare system.
In the spirit of clear, consistent, and strong compliance with Executive Order 2020-21, we are requesting that you consider issuing additional guidance as to the allowable and prohibited usage of short-term vacation rental properties. This guidance would be extremely helpful in protecting the residents of vacation areas in Michigan. Thank you for your consideration of this request and please let us know if we can do anything to assist.

Sincerely,

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