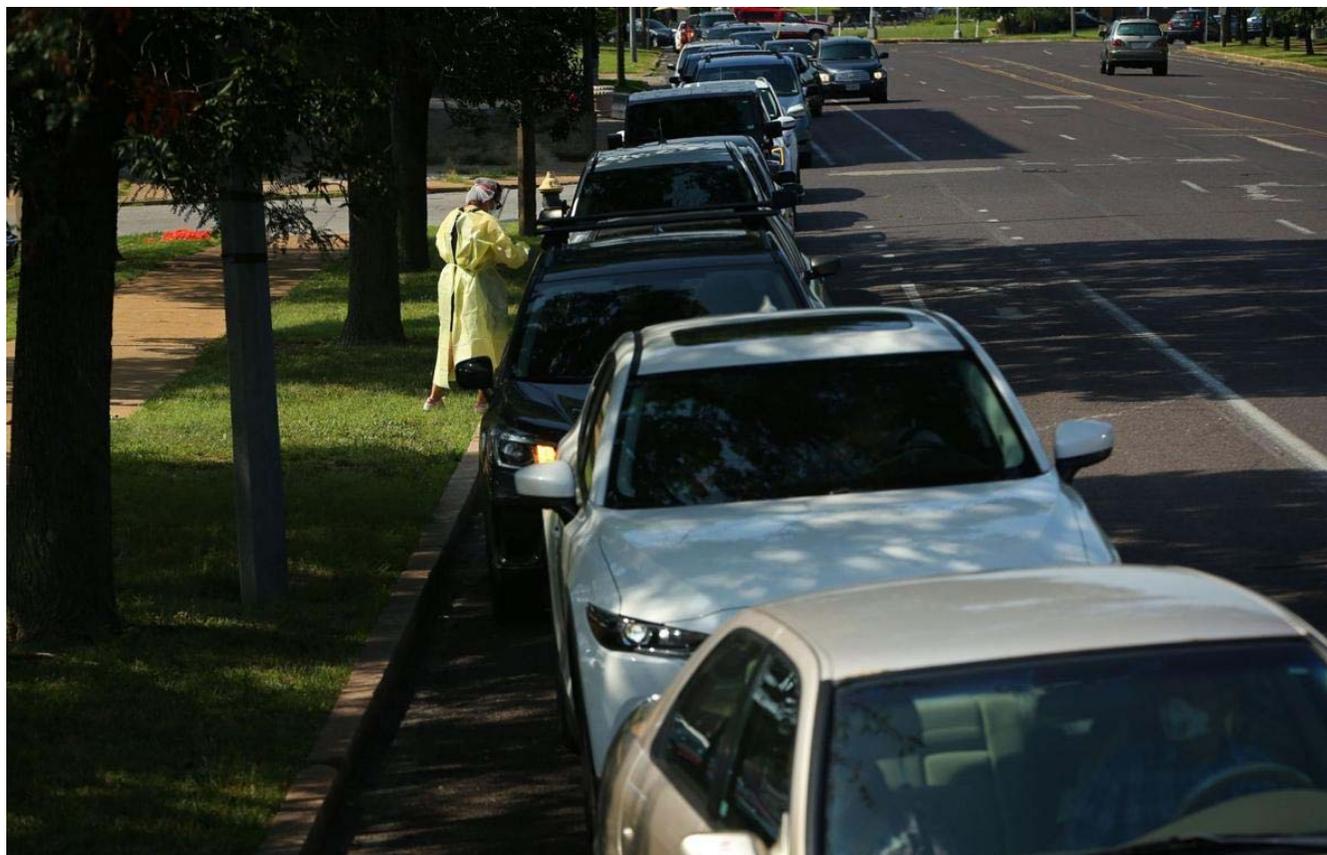


[https://www.stltoday.com/opinion/columnists/james-croft-st-louis-leaders-allowed-politics-to-prevail-over-public-health/article\\_4b3dd861-857a-5409-bb8a-fccd75392689.html](https://www.stltoday.com/opinion/columnists/james-croft-st-louis-leaders-allowed-politics-to-prevail-over-public-health/article_4b3dd861-857a-5409-bb8a-fccd75392689.html)

## ...James Croft: St. Louis' leaders allowed politics to prevail over public health

By James Croft

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Maria Olivos, a volunteer for Affinia Healthcare, checks in motorists seeking testing on July 17 at a combined walk-up and drive-thru testing location at the health system's South Broadway office.

Christian Gooden,

**T**he evidence is now clear: St. Louis reopened too early and too quickly. In recent days, coronavirus cases and hospitalizations have dramatically increased, and last week St. Louis found itself on a list of 11 cities called to task for failing to control the virus. As a result, St. Louisans — in both the city and the county — have been put at risk for illness and death. The responsibility for these failures lies directly at the feet of our political leaders, whose indecisive, reactive and

muddled response to the pandemic imperils us all.

When the pandemic first struck St. Louis, I was heartened by the swift response of Mayor Lyda Krewson and St. Louis County Executive Sam Page. Our city went into lockdown quickly, when there were only a few cases in the community, and I allowed myself to hope that this would be a sign of strong leadership throughout the crisis. However, as the lockdown took its toll and our collective patience wore thin, it became increasingly clear that political considerations were taking precedence over the best scientific advice and the health of the community.

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First, both the city and the county chose not to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines regarding when to begin a phased reopening, substituting their own less stringent and more subjective ones. Instead of waiting for 14-day decreases in documented cases before ending the lockdown, as the national guidelines suggest, city and county officials decided that seven days would be enough. While national guidelines urged cities to track the incidence of influenza-like illnesses and documented cases of COVID-19 when making judgments regarding when it is safe to reopen, St. Louis decided to look only at hospitalizations — a much less stringent measure.

That's how politicians in the city and county concocted a false rationale for swiftly reopening. Leaders in the community who warned that the reopening was too fast, and that the data was being fudged, were disregarded.

When the city reopened, leaders compounded their mistake by failing to impose strict enforcement mechanisms to ensure that businesses, workplaces and other places where people gather followed the social distancing and sanitation guidelines. Initially, masks were optional, and businesses were expected to act in good faith. Individual customers were left to decide whether a grocery store or restaurant was doing enough to keep them safe. Without any mechanism for encouraging compliance with the new guidelines — as other cities throughout the world had

already done — widespread failure to meet public safety requirements was a virtual certainty.

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As a member of the Clergy Advisory Board to the Department of Health, I have seen firsthand how medical advice has been twisted in the hands of our politicians. I have attended numerous meetings with officials from the Department of Health in which local clergy were told unequivocally that it is unsafe for churches to be open. In one meeting, the director of health even said he had told his own pastor not to reopen their church. And yet, St. Louis' political leaders gave churches the all-clear, allowing them to resume services if they chose.

This sort of misleading messaging dents confidence in our public officials and leads to confusion. Many clergy not party to the private advisory board meetings are under the impression that that it was safe to reopen — but that is not what we were being told behind closed doors. The city and the county have both known for a while that their public guidance to individuals, businesses, churches and the broader community was out of step with the advice of their own experts — but they went ahead anyway, and we are now paying the price.

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I do not blame the Department of Health or our Pandemic Task Force for our current situation. I have no doubt they were offering honest, accurate scientific advice to our political leadership. Acting City Health Director Fredrick Echols has, in particular, been responsive and forthcoming with his honest appraisal of the situation. Nor do I envy our political leaders, who have been thrust into a crisis no one was prepared for or could have predicted.

I know how hard it is to make decisions about whether to reopen or to stay closed, decisions that could affect the health of staffers, members, and even the viability of the entire congregation. However, it is in times of crisis when decisive, honest,

evidence-based leadership is most required. St. Louis' leaders have failed to provide it.

**James Croft** is the leader of the Ethical Society of St. Louis, one of the largest humanist congregations in the world.