

The 2021 National Convention is Canceled

A year ago, the NRLCA was faced with an extremely difficult and unprecedented decision: whether to hold its National Convention in Spokane, Washington in the midst of a catastrophic global pandemic. The decision to cancel was painful, but given the path the coronavirus took, in hindsight it was the right one to make. Even with all of the unknowns at the time, we were confident that things would improve enough to be able to make a straightforward decision to hold the 2021 convention in Orlando. Unfortunately, that is simply not the case, and we again find ourselves having to make a difficult decision as to whether to bring together 3,000 people from all over the country to convene in Florida.

While the quick development of effective vaccines certainly indicates that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, new variants have emerged, and infection rates are again on the rise. There is simply no way to know what the situation will be in Florida in August. However, the National Board has made every effort over the last few months to find out as much as we can in order to make the most informed decision possible. As we did last year, we have closely followed public health guidance from organizations such as the CDC, WHO, and state and local health departments, which publish the latest statistics and trends and offer guidance on mass gatherings. We also directly consulted with leading public health experts and discussed our findings with your state presidents - many of whom have already canceled their own conventions. Finally, we looked into technological options that might allow us to hold a smaller “hybrid” event with some virtual options.

With all of this information in hand, we could only come to one conclusion: it is simply not feasible to hold the 2021 National Convention without great risk to the delegates, their families, and other attendees.

Therefore, the National Board, after careful deliberation and consultation with the state presidents, has unanimously decided to cancel the 2021 National Convention.

Why We’re Canceling

Infection Rates are Rising and Contagious Variants are Emerging

According to the CDC, since the beginning of the pandemic, over 31 million Americans have been infected with COVID-19 and well over half a million Americans have died. Most other states have seen increases in infections, including Michigan, where cases and hospitalizations have more than doubled over the last two weeks. The current infection rate in the U.S. (averaging 66,118 new cases per day) is more than twice what it was this time last year (29,300 per day).

In Orange County, Florida (where Orlando is located), which has a population of under 1.4 million people, there have been about 251,000 cases and close to 5,000 deaths. Significantly, cases there have *increased* over the past two weeks, and on Monday, April 5, the Orlando Sentinel reported that “Testing has found all five so-called ‘variants of concern’ in Orange County,” with 142 cases of the highly contagious variants. (LINK:

<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/coronavirus/os-ne-coronavirus-orange-april-5-update-20210405-ftxaxgsdgzdw7p75mjwg6h33na-story.html>). They are reporting over 400 new COVID-19 infections and over 300 hospitalizations a day in Orange County. These numbers are not encouraging.

As those numbers show, despite the vaccine rollout and many states lifting restrictions, we are not out of danger. In fact, things appear to be getting *worse* in many respects.

Public Health Experts Still Warn Against Mass Gatherings

Meanwhile, most public health organizations and experts are strongly advising against mass gatherings of 250 people or more – some are advising against even less than that. The CDC recently stated that *even vaccinated individuals* should avoid medium and large-sized in-person gatherings – especially those that take place indoors. While there are no longer legal restrictions on such gatherings in Florida, the state’s health department still encourages all individuals to avoid congregating in groups larger than 10 (<https://floridahealthcovid19.gov/frequently-asked-questions/#:~:text=All%20persons%20in%20Florida%20are,groups%20larger%20than%2010.>)

Think about these numbers and public health guidance in terms of what happens at our National Conventions. To get the business of the Union done, we have to gather over a thousand delegates in one space (or 100-300 people in smaller rooms), for several days, to discuss, debate, present, and vote. Imagine the size of the room needed to ensure people can maintain 6 feet of social distancing. Imagine the difficulty of ensuring that everyone wears a mask. Even if we could guarantee all of the proper precautions, the experts we spoke with still felt that there would be an unacceptable level of risk, in large part because we cannot control what people do before they enter and after they leave the room. Individuals will be coming from parts of the country with higher infection rates, new virus variants, and different levels of restrictions. And given that there is a five-day incubation period and many individuals with the virus do not show any symptoms, even one infected person could unwittingly infect many, and those people could then bring the illness back to their own communities.

What the Experts Told Us: Don’t Do It

Over the past few weeks, we have been consulting directly with public health experts from around the country. Among them, were three of the country’s leading experts on mass gatherings and infectious diseases from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health’s Center for Health Security, including a member of the WHO Novel Coronavirus-19 Mass Gatherings Expert Group. We explained the particulars of our convention to these experts, and we expressed that we would like to hold the event, but only if it could be done safely. To a person, each expert advised us that bringing over 3,000 people in from all over the country to spend several days together indoors constituted an unacceptably high level of risk. They agreed that there would be no way to guarantee the safety of conference attendees and recommended against holding the convention at all.

The experts pointed out the issues discussed above: the travel from every state, the concentration of even 1,000 people in one room for an extended period of time, and the difficulty enforcing

social distancing and masking. They added that masks vary in fit and effectiveness and cannot guarantee to protect against transmission indoors. They also highlighted the demographics of our conference attendees, many of whom are over age 60, and many of whom have comorbidities such as hypertension, diabetes, or heart disease. This is a population at extremely high risk of infection from and severe reaction to the coronavirus. Finally, these experts explained that it is unlikely that the U.S. will reach the 70% vaccination levels we need (at a minimum) to achieve herd immunity – a key benchmark that must be reached before we can safely hold mass gatherings again.

There was a clear consensus among all of the experts we consulted: don't do it.

The National Board Investigated and Considered Options for a Virtual or Hybrid Convention

While we conducted our research and consultations, we also explored the possibility of holding a convention entirely or partially online. We discovered some promising technology and met with experts in online meetings about electronic voting. At the end of the day, we concluded that these options would not permit us to do everything we need to do at our convention. Most critically, we were concerned with Department of Labor rules governing officer elections. We could not be assured that holding officer elections online would satisfy DOL's requirements should someone challenge the election. Nor could we be sure that all of our delegates would have the technological knowhow or resources to participate.

We also considered a postponement until later in the year, but even if we could find a venue at this point, we worry that we'll only be right back in this position in a few months. Planning a convention takes a long time, and we cannot wait until the last minute. We are a unique union in that we hold a national convention every year, and we believe the best course at this point is to start planning for the 2022 convention now.

The Final Decision: Safety First

Because we put on a large convention with many moving parts, we do not have the luxury to wait until closer to August to make a final decision on whether to hold the convention. We had to decide now and based on the best data and advice available to us. Thus, we pulled out all the stops to ensure that our decision would be as well informed as possible, and we shared all of the information we gathered with the state presidents so that they too could give us their input after consulting their boards. In a recent Zoom meeting several state presidents shared personal and heart-wrenching stories about how COVID-19 has affected them and others in their states. Each state board provided substantive input into our decision, and most states agreed that the convention should be canceled. We heard from several state presidents and other state officers that if the national convention went ahead as scheduled, they would not be attending.

At the end of the day, the health and safety of our members is our number one priority. No convention is worth a serious illness or death. And while there are never any guarantees – even in non-pandemic times – we have to make a good faith effort to mitigate the chances of those things happening. It is doubtful, but perhaps we'll get to August, everybody will be vaccinated, the virus will be under control, and people will feel safe traveling across the country, sharing a

meeting space with thousands of other people, and otherwise taking part in mass gatherings. We certainly hope so. But it is equally possible that we will see another surge of the coronavirus or its variants, or at the very least, that we will still be in dangerous territory. The fact is, we do not know. But based on what we do know, the risk of holding our national convention in August is simply too great to put the lives of our members or their families or guests or neighbors and communities back home at risk.

We will be holding a Zoom meeting for the membership with more information in the coming weeks. Please stay tuned to the website for more updates.

Finally, we look forward to seeing many of you for a safe and productive National Convention in 2022. We are pleased that the Rosen Shingle Creek Hotel in Orlando, Florida will welcome our National Convention delegates and guests for the 2022 National Convention, which will begin on Tuesday, September 6 and conclude on Friday, September 9. If conditions permit, we also hope to be able to attend some of the postponed state conventions or other meetings later this calendar year.

Regretfully:

Your National Board