

Quarantine rules eased for seniors after outcry

Leila B. Salaverria

Senior citizens won't be under complete house arrest after all. Following public outcry, Trade Secretary Ramon Lopez said that senior citizens who have to go to work or go out to buy necessities will be allowed to leave their homes during the general community quarantine, which starts on Friday in parts of the country with low to moderate risk of new coronavirus infection.

Lopez issued the clarification through a statement read over state-run television station, after lawmakers protested the earlier announcement that citizens 60 years old and above, and 19 years old and below would have to stay home in areas under general community quarantine. More officials, including several senators, protested the policy on Thursday.

Lopez, a member of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases, said there would be exceptions to the policy.

"[The task force] is not insisting that seniors are under house arrest or will be under house arrest. This is just an overall policy presented to us due to the vulnerability of the age segment, especially during the quarantine period," he said in a statement read by Communications Secretary Martin Andanar.

Lopez said operating guidelines would be issued.

"Of course, the seniors who are actively working or running business will be allowed. We will use ID system," he said.

Seniors will also be allowed to leave their homes if they are going for a medical checkup, buying food or medicine, and visiting offices to ask for government aid, Lopez said.

Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said in an online press briefing that the task force eased the restrictions to allow working senior citizens and people below 21 years to go to work and shop for necessities during the general community quarantine.

Members of the House of Representatives on Wednesday denounced the policy as "arbitrary" and "inhumane," and Employers Confederation of the Philippines president Sergio Ortiz-Luis Jr. said the regulation was not well thought out. Business owners

Ortiz-Luis, 75, pointed out that many business owners, especially of small companies, are senior citizens who have to personally oversee company operations.

He also cited double standard in the regulation, pointing out that most government officials, including President Duterte and most members of his Cabinet, are senior citizens.

Ortiz-Luis said the government should help senior citizens, "not make their lives difficult."

“[Y]ou think you’re protecting them. No, you’re harming them. You’re harming the economy,” he said.

There is no available data on the number of workers 18 to 20 years old, and those 60 and above. But data from the Philippine Statistics Authority showed that as of July 2019, 15.3 percent of the employed workforce—around 6.6 million—are 15 to 24, while 15.9 percent—about 6.8 million—are 55 and above. The numbers suggest a significant part of the workforce will be wiped out if the new quarantine policy is enforced.

Several senators called on officials to review the policy.

Senior senators

Senate Minority Leader Franklin Drilon said the restriction would affect him, Senate President Vicente Sotto III, and Senators Richard Gordon, Panfilo Lacson and Lito Lapid.

He said it would also mean that the President and many Cabinet members, including Health Secretary Francisco Duque, would have to stay at home.

Lacson said the policy was “insensitive,” adding that those who proposed it should have their heads examined.

“Many senior citizens are far healthier and have stronger immune systems than their younger counterparts. To indiscriminately prohibit them from going out of their homes is not only arbitrary, it is [also] downright insensitive,” he said.

Lacson said that several members of his Senate staff much younger than he cannot keep up with him when he uses the stairs to climb to his sixth-floor office. His immune system remains strong, he said.

“The dire question is: When will we see other sweeping and irrational moves?” he added.

There should be exemptions

Sen. Sonny Angara said he understood that older adults had a higher risk of contracting diseases, and that they should be protected. But there should be exemptions to the policy of keeping them at home, he said.

“Many seniors are also living alone or separate from their families so prohibiting them from going out of their homes to buy essential goods, such as food and medicine will lead to a lot of problems on their part,” Angara said.

Officials can also implement rules to favor senior citizens who are going out, such as implementation of special hours and priority services at establishments like grocery and drug stores, he said.

Businesses should also allow online transactions using senior citizen cards for discounts to essential goods, Angara said. The photo or screenshot of the ID should suffice, he added.

“The Philippines is not an aging society so the risks are not as high as other countries with a

greater percentage of their population age 65 or above. Of course, the risks are still there for the immunocompromised or those with a weakened immune system, which is why we should find a balance between the needs of the seniors and their vulnerability to disease,” Angara said.

Reconsider new policy

Lawyer Romulo Macalintal on Thursday urged President Duterte to reconsider the new policy.

“While there are constitutional and legal issues that could be raised against such policy, I honestly believe that this is the time when what is legal should yield to what is practical and equitable and the use of common sense and prudent judgment under a given situation is called for,” Macalintal said in a letter to the President.

Saying that most of the country’s senior citizens are “still strong and physically fit” and that many of them “[can] be found in big corporations and offices,” Macalintal reminded Mr. Duterte that most of his Cabinet members are “still in the best years of their government service.”

He also claimed that studies have shown that ages 60 to 70 are the most productive of people’s lives, the second being 70 to 80. —WITH REPORTS FROM ROY STEPHEN C. CANIVEL AND CHRISTINE O. AVENDAÑO

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