

To the Leelanau County Board of Commissioners,

We are current and retired physicians who reside in Leelanau County. We write today to express our opposition to the Board adopting any resolution supporting The Great Barrington Declaration.

Many of us have been, with the rest of our healthcare colleagues, on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic since it began a year ago. For those who it affects critically, it can mean death. While nearly all who contract COVID-19 will not suffer that fate, many face short- and long-term effects that we still do not completely understand. In addition, its impact on loved ones of those with COVID-19, and the health system at large, cannot be understated—family members and friends have been forced to be physically distant at times of physical and emotional need. To be sure, these forced diversions have exacerbated other medical problems; but without such critical steps, a surge in COVID-19 patients has the potential to overwhelm our entire system, rendering any medical care largely impracticable.

We oppose The Great Barrington Declaration because it prioritizes a “return to normal” for many over the health of others. We acknowledge that the pandemic’s impact on our economy, as well as our individual (and collective) mental health, has been devastating. And we know some countries initially adopted this approach to COVID-19 (but have since changed course). We believe this proposed public policy unethically treats the need for economic recovery as more important than preventing the virus’s toll on our population. Its entire premise—spreading COVID-19, unmitigated until we achieve “herd immunity”—means that large swaths of the population will have to unnecessarily suffer its effects. On this, the Benzie-Leelanau County District Health Department could not be more clear: “[T]oo many lives would be lost in the process of letting the infection naturally spread throughout the community.” We cannot agree that intentionally exposing the majority of our population to this virus is good public health policy, let alone one that is morally acceptable. And we cannot agree that doing so in a county in which residents are disproportionately older than the rest of the state and country—and thus most at risk for COVID-19’s most devastating effects—would demonstrate the Board’s commitment to caring for all of those for whom it was elected to represent. (We also would be remiss to not point out that Leelanau County’s more-at-risk population necessarily depends upon those who are less so for care and services, and thus we understand cannot truly be “isolated” as proposed by the Declaration.)

Finally, proposing that the County support this Declaration now when vaccinations are becoming available is a mixed-message at best and irresponsible at worst. Our own Health Department estimates those over 65 and essential workers will not be able to be vaccinated until July 2021. Encouraging the full reopening of our society at this juncture, in our view, runs counter to our collective sacrifice since this pandemic began. The Declaration also does not consider the feasibility of achieving herd immunity by way of vaccination, as it was issued before the vaccine trials demonstrated their effectiveness and safety. Now is the time to model those recommendations set forth by the County’s Health Department and to encourage residents to do the same—continue social distancing, wear masks to protect our neighbors, practice good hygiene, and get vaccinated when able. Now is the time to find ways to assist the Health Department in its efforts to distribute the vaccine in a timely and efficient manner to all Leelanau

County residents. And with respect to the mental health toll cited in support of adopting the Declaration, we urge the Board to gather more facts as to its impact in the County, and then work towards building improved mental healthcare resources to serve those whom are in need.

Regards,

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