

Louisiana COVID-19 cases rise, with New Orleans hardest hit

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The southern US state of Louisiana has experienced a rapid increase in reported COVID-19 cases and deaths over the past two weeks. The first case was identified on March 9. As Friday, the Louisiana Department of Health has reported 537 confirmed cases and 14 deaths. Twenty-eight of the 64 parishes (or counties) in the state have reported cases, with Orleans parish, which includes the city of New Orleans, reporting 326 cases and ten deaths. On March 17 it was reported that New Orleans became second only to Seattle, Washington in per capita reported cases.

Six of the deaths so far reported in Louisiana have been of New Orleans residents. Five of these were residents of Lambeth House, a retirement community in the Uptown area of the city that reported its first case on March 6 and confirmed 13 cases by March 19. It has since been designated as the only “cluster” area of COVID-19 in the state.

Responding to the news of the first three presumptive cases in the state on March 10, Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards stated on Twitter that “Louisiana has been preparing for this moment for many weeks” and that “The CDC [Centers for Disease Control] still believes the risk to the general public is low, but we will work quickly and decisively to assess the risk of those around this patient.” New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell said, “At this time, we believe the risk to the public remains low—but we are being vigilant and deliberate at every stage.”

Two weeks prior to the governor and mayor’s statements, parades and other festivities were being held during New Orleans’ carnival season, which culminated on Mardi Gras (February 25). At the time, there were no reported positive cases in Louisiana. According to Dr. Richard Oberhelman, chair of the Global Community Health Department of Tulane’s

School of Public Health, some of the out-of-town visitors “were from places like Italy, France and Asia, where the virus was already spreading before we saw it here.” He continued, “There’s a lot of close personal contact. So that’s the perfect opportunity for spread of viruses.” Less than a month later, cases have skyrocketed across the state.

Furthermore, patients who have contracted the virus in Arkansas, Tennessee and Texas are also reported to have traveled to New Orleans during carnival season. “I don’t think it says anything about the area. I think it says something more about the event and what large crowds can produce, which is why so many places are canceling big events,” said Dr. Susan Hassig, an epidemiologist with the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

Reflecting the rapidity with which the virus is spreading in the state, while exposing the unpreparedness and inadequate initial response to the threat posed to public health and infrastructure, Bel Edwards declared a state of emergency on March 11. On the same day, Mayor LaToya Cantrell declared a state of emergency in New Orleans. On March 13, Bel Edwards signed a proclamation closing all K-12 public schools in the state. On March 15, the first two deaths in the state were reported. Four days later, Bel Edwards stated at a press conference that it would take 10 days or less to overwhelm the health care capacity in the state, including New Orleans’ health care system.

There are only 7,485 hospital beds, including intensive care, in the Metro New Orleans Area. Dr. Joseph Kanter, regional medical director for the Louisiana Department of Health told 4WWL TV: “The storm’s coming in. See the clouds, see the weather report, so we need to be preparing.” Louisiana only has 923 ventilators and, as of this writing, only 899 tests

have been completed since the outbreak of the virus in the state. “The worst-case scenario is that people get very sick and we don’t have hospital personnel and rooms to care for them,” Kanter said.

On March 16, Cantrell filed an emergency proclamation with the Civil District Court for Orleans Parish. It stated that from March 17 to April 16, public and private gatherings are banned; bars, health clubs, malls, casinos, and entertainment venues are to be closed; and dining in at restaurants is to cease. Public libraries are also closed. On March 17, the Regional Transit Authority in the New Orleans began service reduction of public transportation via buses, streetcars and ferries.

These closures are having a negative economic and social impact on the city’s estimated 80,000 service workers, many of whom rely on additional income during carnival and festival season in the first half of the year to get them through the summer. Artists and engineers are also being deeply affected. Along with weekly performances, many of the city’s major music festivals have either been canceled or postponed until later in the year.

“Oh, this is it, yea. Late March and April are the biggest time of year for every New Orleans musician,” New Orleans musician Dave Jordan told local media. “This is the busiest time of the year for us,” Miguel Barrosse with Sentre Sound said. “We probably lost 20 to 30 percent of our yearly income in a matter of a few hours.” Zack Smith, a photographer, stated that “Everybody has lost a job or two or three.”

Rent payments, unemployment and SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] benefits and a lack of mental health assistance are putting a large swath of the city’s workforce in an increasingly precarious position. According to bar manager Mark Schettler, these hardships and the resulting mental stress have already caused at least two service workers in New Orleans to take their own lives.

Protesters associated with a local hospitality group voiced their outrage at a press conference Mayor Cantrell gave on March 9. One of the members told 4WWL “If we don’t have sick leave and we don’t have health care we get all of the customers sick and our coworkers sick.” The group’s demands included emergency enacted sick pay, health care and free testing. “They say that their hands are tied, they say

they don’t have funding. But when it comes to cops, when it comes to anything they deem appropriate they jump and put millions of dollars wherever they want,” said Ashlee Pintos, a worker with the group.

Cantrell’s team simply pointed out that the constitution of Louisiana states that “no local governmental subdivision shall establish a mandatory, minimum number of vacation or sick leave days, whether paid or unpaid.”

Serving as a grim echo of the repressive state methods employed during Hurricane Katrina, 155 national guard troops have been activated for missions in the New Orleans and neighboring Jefferson Parish area. Among their duties include site security and traffic control. Governor Bel Edwards has reportedly authorized up to 400 to be activated, with that number no doubt expected to grow as the situation worsens, and as the working class continues to express its opposition to the negligent and unorganized character of the state’s response to the health crisis.

Col. Kenneth Baillie, the Guard’s point man in New Orleans, stated that “We’re prepared to fulfill any function the city asked us to help them with and Jefferson Parish as well.”



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