

COVID-19 hits Nevada: Catastrophic job losses coupled with woefully inadequate health care infrastructure

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Within the last week, hundreds of thousands of Nevadans have lost their jobs as measures have been implemented to slow the spread of coronavirus, leading to the largest number of unemployment claims in the state since the 2009 Great Recession.

According to the Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation (DETR) 6,356 unemployment insurance claims were submitted during the second week of March with a significantly higher number expected for the third week.

Over 206,000 casino, hospitality, entertainment and food service workers have been laid off in Nevada following Democratic Governor Steve Sisolak's criminally belated order to shut down all casinos, gambling establishments and "nonessential" businesses for 30 days, beginning last Tuesday.

Laid-off workers took to social media to report difficulties applying for unemployment on the DETR's website. Users reported multiple website crashes in addition to appointments that are days away, delaying the arrival of funds and likely underreporting the number of unemployment claims.

In a report published by the Economic Policy Institute, authors David Cooper and Julia Wolfe estimate that the social distancing measures needed to halt the spread of the virus will have the most economic impact on states dependent on tourism, such as Florida, Hawaii and Nevada. In the study, the authors estimate that 5.25 million total jobs in the US will be lost by the summer. In a state such as Nevada, where "leisure, hospitality and retail" constitute 40.2 percent of total private-sector jobs, Cooper and Wolfe estimate 66,656 additional job losses or 5.3 percent of the total private-sector employment in the state, the largest estimated

percentage job loss in the country.

The pandemic has crippled the tourist industry, on which Las Vegas is heavily reliant, and which the working class is being made to pay for. In the latest barrage of layoffs, the Hakkasan Group abruptly terminated 1,600 workers, leaving only the senior management team. Hakkasan operated several nightclubs and pools at properties owned by Caesars and MGM Resorts.

In the layoff notice sent out to all affected employees on Friday afternoon, Hakkasan Group Chief Financial Officer Michael Ryan-Southern assured workers, "We are doing all that we can to protect our team members where possible...." The laid-off employees will receive two weeks of pay before their benefits, including health care, are terminated at the end of the month.

It was first reported by the *Wall Street Journal* that Bill Hornbuckle, currently the president and COO of MGM, will take over for outgoing CEO Jim Murren earlier than anticipated. After laying off 70,000 workers, Murren is stepping down at MGM to lead the COVID-19 Response, Relief and Recovery Task Force, a "public-private partnership" created by Governor Sisolak. The task force will be overseen by the governor's office and will focus on a "plethora of issues," including assessing "physical assets and human capital," as reported in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

These issues, according to Sisolak, will involve Murren tapping his political connections, such as close friend Vice President Mike Pence, to circumvent the current acquisition process and acquire medical equipment and resources from the federal government. With Murren leading the task force, it would not be

surprising to see certain hotel properties converted to hospital rooms with laid-off hospitality workers given a choice of risking their lives working in a setting they are untrained in and ill-equipped to handle or remaining laid-off and destitute.

As is the case throughout the US, Nevadans have received contradictory information from health and government officials, leading to a proliferation of misinformation, inadequate quarantine procedures and the continuing spread of the contagion.

Mayor Carolyn Goodman, who is not a doctor or an epidemiologist, urged Governor Sisolak to reconsider the 30-day shutdown of nonessential businesses during a city council meeting this past Wednesday, comparing the virus to “the general flu.” Goodman’s priorities echo those of the entire ruling class in that they are not conjured up to safeguard the population; instead, her primary concern is to get businesses running in the next “8 to 10 days.”

In addition to anxiety caused by the sudden loss of income, the more than 3 million people who live in the state also have to contend with a criminally inadequate health care system. The Nevada Hospital Association estimates that there are 764 intensive-care unit (ICU) beds in total throughout the state. Currently 649 of them are occupied, leaving 115 available.

There are currently 241 active cases of COVID-19 in the state, with four so far succumbing to the virus. Of those infected, over 20 percent have required hospitalization. If that trend were to continue, and half the population were to contract the virus, nearly 300,000 would need to be hospitalized. According to a model published by the Harvard Global Health Institute last Tuesday, approximately five percent of those hospitalized require intensive-care treatment. In Nevada that translates to 15,000 ICU beds, meaning what is currently available is less than one percent of what would be required.

Trying to gauge how many beds will be needed is difficult due to the lack of testing conducted in the state. Within the whole state less than 3,000 COVID-19 tests have been administered. The two public labs reportedly have the capacity to process between 120-180 tests a day. On Friday, the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services contradicted the World Health Organization’s (WHO) call for widespread testing and advised, “if you have symptoms, assume

you have COVID-19, persons with mild or moderate symptoms should not seek medical care nor try to get tested.”

“Mild” symptoms for COVID-19 include pneumonia, headaches and vomiting. As the WHO guidelines have emphasized, everyone needs to be tested in order to locate, isolate and treat the virus. The “medical advice” disseminated by the Nevada Health Department is meant to kill, not help people.

Compounding the shortage of beds in Nevada is a shortage of trained medical personnel. There are 108 doctors in Nevada for every 100,000 residents, placing Nevada 46th in the country. Even more disturbing, the state ranks even lower in certified nurses, with roughly 674 nurses per 100,000 residents.

Without available testing, followed by quarantine, treatment and isolation, those infected will continue to spread the virus and run the risk of permanent health damage and death. All aspects of capitalist society have failed the working class in Nevada and around the world, leaving the population woefully unprepared on every level to combat the pandemic.



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