

“There’s such a cruelty about the situation”: New York City hospitals overwhelmed by coronavirus surge

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The names of the workers we interviewed have been changed to protect their identities. If you are a medical worker and want to speak out about the unfolding crisis, please contact the WSW.

The number of confirmed coronavirus patients in New York, now the epicenter of the spread of the virus in the United States, continues to explode. As of Thursday, there were 37,258 people who had tested positive in New York state, over 21,000 of them in New York City. Over 5,000 have been hospitalized, a 40 percent increase in hospitalization over the past 24 hours. There are now 1,290 patients in ICU units. All 1,800 ICU spots in the city are expected to be filled by Friday. The death toll has risen to 385, with 100 dying between Wednesday and Thursday. About 53 percent of those with confirmed cases are between 18 and 49 years old.

At Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, a huge makeshift morgue has been set up with tents and refrigerated trucks. According to Politico, New York City morgues, capable of handling up to 4,500 bodies, are nearing capacity, and will likely be overwhelmed by next week. The state has asked FEMA for 85 refrigerated trailers to handle the overflow of dead.

Hospitals in New York, which constitute the largest network in the US, are already overwhelmed. Horrifying reports about skyrocketing numbers of patients and dead, critical shortages of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), ventilators and other equipment, and medical staff falling ill have emerged from virtually every hospital in the city. There are dozens of petitions online to solicit donations for desperately needed PPE for medical staff.

Only 1,000 additional beds are being constructed now at the Javits Center. A Navy ship with 1,000 additional hospital beds is scheduled to arrive in the city within a week. These makeshift initiatives fall far short of rapidly escalating needs. The city has just over 53,000 hospital beds and will need between 114,000 and 150,000 beds, including up to

37,000 ICU beds to cope with the crisis, which is still only in its early stages.

There is also a severe shortage of staff. One COVID-19 patient requires on average the medical attention of five to six professionals, including a respiratory therapist, a medical assistant, doctors and a social worker. New York University and Cornell University are graduating their seniors from medical schools before graduation day so they can immediately join the workforce. About 40,000 retired doctors, nurses and other medical staff have volunteered to return to work.

A substantial number of staff are already infected or are afraid to go to work because of the woefully inadequate equipment. Dozens of paramedics and firefighters have tested positive, and at least one 34-year-old paramedic is in critical condition. No numbers have been released for nurses and doctors. On Tuesday night, the first nurse, a 48-year-old worker at Mount Sinai West hospital, died from COVID-19, sending shockwaves through the medical community.

Kayla, a nurse in the opioid treatment program at the hospital spoke to the WSW on Wednesday. She called the news about her colleague’s death “completely devastating” and said that the hospital, which treats over 700 coronavirus patients, did not inform its staff about the number of infected medical workers. Nor was it possible for her to find out whether she was positive. “Even as a hospital worker I don’t have access to tests. If I had money I could easily get tested.”

The city guidelines now oblige hospital staff to continue to work unless they are seriously ill. When they are sick and have no fever, they must not stay away from work longer than three days. If they have a fever, the time limit is seven days, well below the two- to four-week period that coronavirus patients have been reported to be infectious.

In his press conference on Thursday, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo stated that the medical staff at Mount Sinai West “have all the PPE they need.” This is a blatant lie.

Earlier this week, a photo circulated on social media showed nurses wearing trash bags because of the lack of protective gowns at the hospital.

Kayla, said, “We are not prepared for a situation like this at all. The amount of masks are limited and the amount of hand soap and gloves is also limited. We are doing the best we can with the resources we have, but the overall hospital does not have enough masks and gloves to cover the medical staff, let alone separate departments. ... There is an overall mood of fear. We are all scared. I work with doctors, nurses, counselors and administration. We are scared. Not only for ourselves but for our patients.”

According to city officials, Elmhurst hospital in Queens is now “ground zero” of the crisis in New York City. The hospital is one of only two public hospitals that serve a huge and ethnically diverse working class community. For over a week, there have been long lines with hundreds of people waiting to be tested, with sick people forced to return day after day without being seen. With only 545 beds, the hospital reportedly has hundreds of Coronavirus patients. In a dramatic appeal to the public, an ER doctor called the coronavirus surge at the hospital “apocalyptic,” stating: “People are dying. We don’t have the tools that we need in the medical department and the hospital to take care of them.”

Another doctor from Elmhurst told BuzzFeed: “Elmhurst is just getting destroyed. It’s very, very gruesome. The hospital has a 15-bed intensive care unit that would normally cover respiratory patients or patients with any significant illness requiring intubation. ... [Now] It’s all COVID. That’s insane.” There is not only a lack of PPE for staff, he pointed out, but also of beds, of chairs and of ventilators.

“It’s pretty common to see someone crying in the hallway. I saw that twice today. Something like 12 people died yesterday. These are bonkers numbers for a hospital, where you’d usually have one or two a day. They [the nurses] don’t even change in and out of PPE. They gear up one time, and that’s it for the whole shift. They don’t want to be exposed for a second, and lots of them are already calling out with fevers.”

At New York Presbyterian, a large private hospital, doctors have begun to treat two patients with one ventilator machine, something unprecedented at the hospital. The director of Global Public Health at Presbyterian, Dr. Graig Spencer, stated, “Last week, we were looking for the one or two coronavirus patients that might be in the ER. Now, it’s hard to find one or two patients that are not coronavirus. The increase is absolutely staggering.”

New York patients are also being treated in other states. A nurse at a small Connecticut hospital told the WSWs that her hospital was treating many New York patients. They had

already reached full capacity with 32 patients in general care and 15 patients in the ICU. “If we had only five more people who need vents, we would not have enough.” The number of confirmed cases rose by 292 percent since Sunday in Connecticut, a steeper increase than in any other US state.

Medical workers and patients in New York City, which is home to Wall Street and has the highest number of resident billionaires and multi-millionaires in the country, are facing the deadly and criminal outcome of definite policies: decades of social cuts and a deliberate policy of malign neglect by the ruling class in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Eric, a social worker who works with psychiatric patients at Bellevue Hospital, told the WSWs that even before the crisis there was a shortage of cleaning personnel at the hospital. He and his co-workers had to clean their office spaces themselves when receiving patients. Only one hand sanitizer was installed in a common area as the outbreak of the coronavirus began, with the administration explicitly refusing to provide more.

“It wasn’t a matter of if, but when [a pandemic would occur]. The public health sector has been cut for decades. There’s such a cruelty about the situation right now ... We’re all competing for these resources. In public health that’s the complete opposite of the approach you should take.”

“We have a men’s shelter around two blocks from us. We get a lot of patients from there. ... We do have a lot of people who are undocumented... We have a lot of patients who are terrified: what does it mean if I do get ill? What if I lose my job, and this supposedly two trillion-dollar-bill has no effect for me? There’s a profound cruelty to this. [They are being treated] as if these are not real people’s lives. ... I do agree that there needs to be a fundamental restructuring of how society functions and how resources are allocated. We cannot live in a society where we have such a vast disparity of wealth and resources that only a few people get whatever they need, while the rest is just SOL [Shit outta luck].”



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