

# Reported COVID-19 cases exceed 1,200 in Washington, D.C. region as public health disaster looms

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As of Thursday, there were 1,277 reported cases of COVID-19 in the Washington, D.C. extended region, which encompasses Virginia, the District of Columbia and Maryland. Since the first initial infections were detected in early March, the region has seen an explosive growth in confirmed coronavirus infections, hitting the young and the old alike.

Maryland, which reported the initial cases of the virus on March 5, had 581 confirmed cases. The District of Columbia, where Democratic Mayor Muriel E. Bowser ordered a complete closure of nonessential businesses Wednesday night, has over 271 cases, including a two-month year old infant. There are over 461 verified cases in Virginia. As of this report, the region has reported over 20 deaths.

In Henrico County, Virginia, a retirement community has reported the region's first cluster of coronavirus cases, with 14 residents and 4 staff contracting the illness. Three residents have already died due to complications from the virus.

However, those most afflicted so far are aged 18-64, a range corresponding to the common ages of working adults. According to a CBS local affiliate, 61 percent of COVID-19 cases in the District of Columbia in the last week were under the age of 40, reflecting both the infectiousness of the disease and the tenuous unemployment of younger adults, whose jobs are largely centered in low-paying work which has remained active during the pandemic.

The recent explosion of positive cases is largely attributable to wider screenings of the population. "When we see an increase in cases day by day ... it isn't telling us what's happening currently, it's really telling us what happened a few weeks ago," said Eric R.

Haupt to the *Washington Post*.

Haupt, who oversees the Division of Infectious Diseases and International Health for the University of Virginia Health System, predicted a "several-fold" growth in infections over the next few weeks.

Hospitalizations from COVID-19 in the region are expected to grow to a total of 180,000 people over the next 12 months, based on estimates of a "moderate" rate of infection—40 percent of the greater Washington, D.C. region. A ProPublica study conducted in partnership with the Harvard Global Health Institute released last week found that, based on 2018 numbers, only 1,600 open hospital beds were available in the District of Columbia. There were even fewer available in intensive care units (ICU), which are best able to deal with COVID-19.

Demonstrating the potential for an infrastructure collapse, last week it was reported that at least 141 District of Columbia firefighters were sent into quarantine after three of their colleagues tested positive for COVID-19 after responding to an emergency in the home of an individual later found to be infected. Since last week, the number of emergency responders quarantined slightly decreased, with 23 firefighters returning to their jobs.

"It's clear that we've got community spread now; that is quite obvious... We are just at the beginning of this. We are not at the middle," said Virginia Governor Ralph Northam of the infection Wednesday. "We are talking about months, and we are going to see these numbers, unfortunately, continue to rise," said the Democrat, who is also a physician.

States of emergency have been declared in D.C., Virginia and Maryland with millions of residents being

told to stay home to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's (WMATA) ridership has plummeted by 90 percent. The system has closed 19 of its 91 metro stations due to what it says is "extremely low ridership." WMATA general manager Paul J. Wiedefeld has requested federal assistance for the transit service as it is running a \$52 million monthly deficit from loss of riders and sanitation costs.

WMATA bus drivers have engaged in a wave of sickouts, forcing WMATA to cut 95 percent of the authority's weekend bus routes last weekend. Drivers are now granted the right to bypass stops which are deemed too crowded to safely serve while rides have been made free to avoid having passenger touching common areas at stations.

As with other parts of the United States, the region has begun to shut down all business deemed "nonessential." Government contractors, particularly those related to national defense and cyber security, however, have been deemed essential and remain active. Virginia has ordered a shutdown of only "certain nonessential businesses," still allowing retail stores to remain open. All fitness centers, dining rooms, movie theatres and entertainment venues have been shuttered.

According to the *Post*, which on Monday rated the government of Virginia's response to the pandemic as "last" among the three jurisdictions, Governor Northam is seeking to protect the state's economy, "which has been the region's strongest." It quotes Grant Neely, Northam's spokesperson, who states, "If you were to shut down the economy, put the entire thing on lockdown... That is going to create a whole lot of other complications."

All schools have been closed throughout the region until late April, with Virginia's K-12 public schools shuttered until June. Campuses, universities and K-12 have moved their studies online.

Over the weekend, police intervened to disperse a crowd gathered to view the annual rite of the cherry blossom in the District of Columbia's Tidal Basin area. "For us to use our local police resources to basically police a national park is an extraordinary use," said D.C. Mayor Bowser, "but we thought [it] very necessary."

While no shelter-in-place orders have yet been issued, police in the District of Columbia "may ask groups such as people playing basketball or soccer to disperse," writes the *Post*.



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