

Leading epidemiologist says Detroit is facing a coronavirus “tsunami”

Kevin Reed
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With the number of coronavirus cases surging to 5,486 and 132 deaths over the weekend, Michigan has moved to number four on the list of states with the most severe outbreaks of the pandemic in the US.

The epicenter in Michigan continues to be the city of Detroit, where the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases stands at 1,542 and 35 deaths. The tri-county metropolitan area of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties have 82 percent of the state's total with 4,494 cases and 110 deaths.

Dr. Teena Chopra, Medical Director of Infection Prevention and Hospital Epidemiology at the Detroit Medical Center, spoke by video with MLive on Saturday. In the video Dr. Chopra said, “I have been saying all along as an epidemiologist that we are going to see a big tsunami. This is going to explode, and we are seeing the surge.

“The growth rate is 100 percent; we are doubling every day and our mortality rate is very high as well. This was expected given our population.

“I have been here for fifteen years and I have worked with the community of Detroit and I know that their issues are unique, and their risk factors are unique.

“If you look at our curve in Detroit, it is steeper than the curve of New York because it is not only the total number of people infected, it is also the growth rate... For Detroit, both are alarming.

“We need more resources from the federal government. We are going to need more resources to help us with additional surges that we are going to see, in the form of additional staffing, more nurses, more resources, more ventilators, more beds.

“If we get all of those, then we will peak by May and after May, we will see the curve taking a direction for the better.”

The rapidly expanding health crisis in suburban Detroit was revealed late Friday when more than 20 people either

already tested positive or were expected to test positive for the coronavirus at the Advantage Living Center nursing home in Roseville. City Fire Chief Michael Holland told local news media, “We’re regarding this as a health emergency, and we’re treating it as such.” Chief Holland also noted that the number of calls they have received from the facility “have gone up exponentially.”

On Saturday, the North American International Auto Show (NAIAS) announced that the 2020 Detroit auto show was being canceled. The Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) is planning to convert the downtown TCF Convention Center into a temporary hospital to test and treat coronavirus patients.

FEMA’s Detroit field hospital is scheduled to be open and functioning at the TCF Center for up to six months, indicating that the federal government has been long aware of the fact that the pandemic is going to extend far beyond the early April timeline specified by President Trump.

The City of Detroit opened a drive-through COVID-19 testing facility at the former Michigan State Fair Grounds on Friday. The Coronavirus Community Care Network (CCCN) released a statement saying that Detroit-area residents “who have received a testing order [prescription] from their doctor and have a scheduled appointment with the CCCN Call Center can get tested.”

Restricting testing to only those residents who can get a prescription from their doctor will prove incredibly dangerous in a city like Detroit where thousands of workers are uninsured or underinsured and without a primary care doctor. There are roughly 50-100 primary care doctors in Detroit, according to top officials in the Detroit Health Department. For a city of 683,000 people, that’s about one doctor for every 6,000-12,000 residents.

According to the CCCN statement, once an appointment has been scheduled, patients enter a checkpoint one-half mile from the testing location. Patients are then given a

mask and must present their prescription with windows rolled up at a second checkpoint. At a third checkpoint, their temperature is taken and they are asked a series of questions. Finally, they are asked to pull up under a wooden canopy where they are swabbed while remaining in their vehicles.

CCCN is expected to test approximately 400 people per day at the fairgrounds through May 8. Hakim Berry, the Chief Operating Officer for Detroit, reported that the first two days of appointment times had been booked within a matter of hours after the call center was opened.

As reported by Democratic Party Mayor Mike Duggan last Thursday, the city signed a contract with New Jersey-based BioReference Laboratories to perform the coronavirus testing of the samples from Detroit residents and those provided by city first responders. The test process will take approximately seven days to be completed and BioReference has been hired to process an estimated 14,000 kits over the next six weeks.

The city did not disclose the cost of each test. However, a look into the BioReference Labs and the global disease diagnostic industry gives a picture of the nature of the corporate feeding frenzy that is taking place as a result of the vast expansion of the virus.

BioReference Labs is located in Elmwood, New Jersey and is a division of OPKO Health, Inc., a diversified international diagnostic and pharmaceutical corporation operating in 30 countries and based in Miami, Florida.

OPKO Health is publicly traded and is listed on the NASDAQ index with a market value of nearly \$1 billion. The announcement by President Trump of a national emergency on March 13 and the allocation of \$50 billion to address the coronavirus were recognized by investors as an opportunity to cash in on the pandemic. While the majority of the stock market was falling dramatically, the value of OPKO stock shot up suddenly by 33 percent on the expectation that BioReference would sign major government contracts.

Writing about a more dramatic surge of OPKO stock as compared to LabCorp and Quest shares, Taylor Carmichael of *Motley Fool* wrote, “Why did OPKO outperform the other two? One possible reason for this disparity is that OPKO is a highly shorted stock. Almost 21% of its float is sold short. Apparently, a lot of short-sellers were caught unawares on Friday, which might explain why the stock jumped so significantly.

“Another reason is that OPKO had some company-specific news on Friday: It announced a partnership with the New York State Department of Health to create a

drive-through testing facility for COVID-19 in New Rochelle, where the disease has hit the community hard. The company plans to offer 5,000 tests a day across its various sites in New York.”

In other words, the disease diagnostic testing by OPKO was considered a losing investment proposition on Wall Street until the coronavirus pandemic hit and the US government treasury was opened up for plundering by Wall Street.

Illustrating the close connections between the Democratic Party establishment and this section of the corporate and financial elite, when asked about the sudden surging value of OPKO stocks, Jon R. Cohen, M.D., Executive Chairman of BioReference Labs, told *Investor Place*, “BioReference has been working expeditiously to develop and offer this test that will yield high-quality and accurate results. I believe that the private sector should be part of the solution in controlling the COVID-19 outbreak and am proud that BioReference can assist Governor Cuomo as he leads New York State through this crisis.”

The disease diagnostic industry is very lucrative for the investors and executives alike. The executive compensation of OPKO Chairman & CEO Dr. Phillip Frost and Vice Chairman Dr. Jane H. Hsiao are \$2,000,000 and \$1,900,000 respectively. Dr. Frost has an estimated net wealth of \$1.5 billion and Dr. Hsiao has an estimated net wealth of \$320 million.

While the executives and investors at OPKO Health and BioReference are protecting their wealth with government funds spent on testing, the working-class population of Detroit is facing the devastating impact of the deadly coronavirus and the longer-term economic impact of the pandemic on their jobs, wages and living standards.



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