

Tennessee state officials recommend health care workers use swim goggles, diapers and garbage bags as protection from COVID-19

Warren Duzak
31 March 2020

The Tennessee Department of Health is recommending the use of swim goggles, diapers, plastic garbage bags and even plastic grocery bags as a protective barrier for doctors and health care workers battling the spread of the COVID-19 virus when they run out of personal protective equipment (PPE).

As of Monday, the state had reported 1,818 infections and ten deaths, with a shortfall of the intensive care units needed to treat the critically ill expected to come in the next two weeks.

When health care workers find themselves without the necessary protective gowns, state health officials have suggested the use of contractor trash bags, a heavier style of trash bags used for debris. In the absence of standard rubber gloves and proper eye protection, state officials are recommending ubiquitous plastic grocery bags and swim goggles to be used, Nashville CBS affiliate NewsChannel 5 reported last week.

A Tennessee Health Department webinar for health care professionals also included a slide which suggested as a means of conserving PPE that surgical masks could be replaced with “bandanas, diapers and even layers of tissue and gauze,” NewsChannel 5 also reported.

Nonetheless, the television news program reported that Tennessee’s Republican governor Bill Lee “insisted” in remarks to its reporters that the supply of protective clothing and equipment in the state was sufficient.

Lee’s patently false statement mirrors statements by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat, who has claimed that the city had enough PPE for hospital staff for another week even though health care workers are already reporting shortages. New York City is currently the nation’s epicenter for the COVID-19 outbreak with 66,500 cases and 1,200 deaths as of Monday.

“That was when I was, like, ‘I’m out,’” Nashville physician Dr. Sonal Gupta told Channel 5 after hearing of Lee’s comments. “If these are the suggestions and we don’t have a supply-chain contact in the works and stuff coming down the pipeline to us, then all I am going to do potentially is be a spreader of disease.”

“Part of it is hard because we want to do right by the patients, but we also want to do right by ourselves,” Dr. Gupta said, adding that now she would practice remote tele-medicine.

Until issuing a belated shelter in place order Monday, Lee had refused to issue a state-wide stay-at-home order, a measure which the World Health Organization (WHO) has insisted is critical to slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

“...(W)e’re not issuing orders, we’re issuing guidance and strong suggestions,” Lee said at a recent press last week. “We don’t have to mandate...”

Lee added that workers and their families would find comfort in prayer. “I want to encourage you to pray. I want you to pray for your citizens that are affected by economic downturns, by the sickness sweeping through the state.”

In response to Lee’s mindless actions, more than 2,000 physicians signed on to a petitioning effort to get Lee to institute a “shelter-in-place” order to aid in the effort to stop the spread of coronavirus in the state.

As of Monday there were more than 28,000 signatures on the petition initiated by Dr. Jennifer Martin, a physician at Vanderbilt University Hospital in Nashville. “The COVID-19 virus is spreading exponentially, and the lives of Tennesseans are at risk. Our only chance to flatten the curve and save lives is to physically distance from each other,” the petition states, also calling on Lee to close unnecessary businesses and order non-essential

workers to shelter-in-place.

The Tennessee Medical Association (TMA) quickly urged its members to sign the petition.

Early last week Lee discounted reports that health care workers were resorting to makeshift PPE, telling reporters, “You know you hear about a lot of makeshift things happening, but there’s not makeshift stuff happening in our state yet.”

Putting to rest any thought of “he said-she said” journalism, the station reported the following: “In fact, NewsChannel 5 obtained pictures showing how health professionals in Tennessee are already using makeshift equipment to protect themselves in order to conserve the good supplies for an expected wave of coronavirus cases.”

Born to wealth and privilege on a 1,000-acre horse farm in Williamson County, Tennessee, the richest county in the state, Lee was handed a successful family business built by his father and uncle. Groomed for inherited success, Lee attended many of the state’s best schools and universities.

He is a supporter of President Donald Trump, charter schools, vouchers and capital punishment. But he wears his religion on his sleeve and makes much of his piety. A former member and supporter of “Men of Valor”, a prison ministry, Lee has claimed an understanding and empathy for people who end up in prison.

“The trauma the vast majority of them endured as a child led me to believe that I would be in prison, too, if it happened to me,” Lee recently told an audience.

Despite his professed understanding and concern for the incarcerated, Lee in February turned down the clemency plea of Nicholas Todd Sutton, 58—the last hope of an inmate who by all accounts from inmates and guards was a changed man after spending his entire adult life in prison. “With the final go-ahead...,” the WWSW reported last month, “the executioner sent two cycles of 1,750 volts of electricity coursing through Sutton’s body.”



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact