

Louisiana ranks fourth in the US for coronavirus deaths

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According to figures published by the Louisiana Department of Health on Thursday the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in the state is now at 9,159, an increase of over 2,700 in just one day. Thirty-seven new deaths were also reported bring the death toll to 310, placing Louisiana fourth for fatalities in the United States. Thursday was the single deadliest day for the state since the onset of the pandemic.

Governor John Bel Edwards used his daily press conference Thursday to announce an extension of stay-at-home orders through the end of April. More than 70,000 workers have filed for unemployment in the last three weeks as restaurants and other businesses have been closed across the state as part of the effort to slow the spread of the virus.

Edwards reported that the virus had now spread to every parish (county) in the state but still sought to downplay the extent of the crisis wracking the state. "While extremely upsetting, this increase in COVID-19 cases appears less a sign of new exponential growth and more a sign of a logjam from commercial labs," the governor told reporters.

At his press conference Wednesday Edwards urged citizens to follow the stay at home orders saying that it could be "a long time" before things return to normal. Addressing the high death rate in Louisiana, Edwards placed the blame on high rates of underlying health conditions which are more prevalent in Louisiana than many other states.

"We've been reporting for decades there are more chronic health conditions (like diabetes, kidney disease, and obesity) in Louisiana than in other states," Edwards told reporters. "When you factor that in what you see playing out is very tragic." Shifting blame from a lack of access to health care onto the people themselves for being generally less healthy than those in other states,

Edwards continued, "Individuals are dying in greater numbers because greater numbers have underlying conditions. Its not because we have sub-standard care."

The city of New Orleans is being hit especially hard with nearly half of the total deaths occurring in the state's largest city. Wednesday afternoon it was confirmed that a nurse working in a New Orleans East hospital had died after contracting coronavirus.

Larrice Anderson, 46, was working closely with COVID-19 patients when she came down with the virus herself and died within a week of testing positive. Anderson is the first nurse in Louisiana confirmed to have died from exposure to the virus while working. With masks and other protective gear supplies dwindling those numbers are in danger of rising as soon as next week.

Despite having about one tenth of the population of the largest state California, Louisiana leads that state and Washington as the state with most deaths behind New York, New Jersey and Michigan.

State officials have been criticized heavily in the media over the past two weeks for not instituting a more serious policy limiting interpersonal contact, with many restaurants still offering take out and few if any markets or stores in New Orleans enforcing a customer limit.

Alongside the lack of social distancing enforcement, the month-long carnival celebration that culminates in Mardi Gras, which draws in over a million people from all over the world to Louisiana every year, is the biggest factor in explaining why the state is being hit particularly hard.

Yet the quality of health care in the state has been suffering for years under Democratic and Republican administrations with deep cuts in health spending taking place over the last two decades and the loss of

public hospitals in the years since Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005. State officials also report that personal protective equipment is critically low and that the state is expecting to run out of ventilators by this weekend.

A Baton Rouge area pastor named Tony Spell bused in over 1,000 people to his church service this week in defiance of social distancing orders, potentially exacerbating the spread of the disease to an already devastated state population. “The virus, we believe, is politically motivated. We hold our religious rights dear and we are going to assemble no matter what someone says,” the pastor told NBC.

Despite the state ban on public gatherings and federal CDC guidelines explicitly prohibiting such large functions, the pastor was able to use his fleet of 27 buses to bring parishioners from the area to his church, where mingling and touching was actively encouraged. The local police departments warned Spell that any further gatherings would be broken up.

The latest models from the White House predict at least 100,000 in the US will die from COVID-19 even with strict adherence to social distancing guidelines.



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