

# COVID-19 cases increase across Illinois as many counties push to reopen

Brian Brown  
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COVID-19 cases are rapidly increasing in multiple counties across Illinois as politicians and business interests push for the government to reopen the economy.

John Deere Harvester factory in East Moline recently confirmed a worker at the facility tested positive for COVID-19. It took days before management alerted workers of the positive case. According to *Quad-City Times* “the worker who contracted the virus had not been to work since April 16. Workers found out about the positive case over this past weekend.”

John Deere, which employs over 2,000 people in Moline, Illinois responded with boilerplate language in an official statement saying, “we will continue to follow guidelines of local and state health officials in determining the best course of action to continue to safeguard our employees.” However the company, which made \$3 billion in profits last year, will continue to keep the factory open, leaving workers at risk of contracting the virus.

Meat processing facilities directly contribute to about one-third of COVID-19 cases in Iowa. Despite this fact, Tyson Fresh Foods, which operates various meatpacking plants in western Illinois and southeastern Iowa, has resumed operations in the Quad-Cities area. In Hillsdale, Illinois near the Quad-Cities, one Tyson plant was temporarily closed for a cleaning but reopened on April 22nd. A different Tyson plant in Waterloo was forced to close last week over an outbreak.

Another common hotspot for COVID-19 in Illinois, like other parts of the country, has been nursing homes. The Newton Care Center, a privately owned facility in Newton, Illinois was notified that a resident came in contact with the virus on April 3. This resident and her roommate both tested positive. On April 19, 16 days

later, 18 additional residents had tested positive for COVID-19.

Once thought of as a haven from the COVID-19 pandemic, rural communities in Illinois have also reported increases in numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths from the virus. The pandemic poses enormous problems for rural areas where public health programs and hospitals have been greatly defunded over the last decade, leaving vulnerable residents in greater danger.

There are over 1000 confirmed COVID-19 cases in southwestern Illinois, which is a largely rural area. St. Clair, an Illinois county neighboring St. Louis, has the largest number of confirmed cases in southern Illinois, with 389 positive cases and 22 deaths. Madison County, which is just north of St. Clair, had 307 positive cases and 16 died. Macon County has over 90 positive cases and 10 deaths. Randolph county has 68 confirmed cases and one death.

According to data from the Illinois Department of Public Health, Randolph county has one of the highest infection rates in the state of Illinois. The data found that both Randolph county and neighboring Monroe county had infection rates of about 150 per 100,000 people. Monroe County has one of the highest death rates per capita of Illinois counties, with 67 positive cases and 10 deaths, nine of which were nursing home residents in Columbia.

In Chester, Illinois, a rural town located within Randolph county, 50 employees have tested positive at the Gilster Mary-Lee Corporation’s food headquarters. Gilster Mary-Lee is a major employer in Chester that produces cereal and baking products.

The company was forced to shut down the factory temporarily due to the outbreak but plans to resume operations again starting in two weeks. The company, with an estimated annual revenue of \$685 million

dollars and 3,000 employees, has made no mention whether workers would receive compensation while out of work or what safety measures will be in effect once workers do return to work.

Health officials believe that the recent rise in the number of COVID-19 cases in Chester is due to a single town event that occurred March 15 before the statewide mandatory shut down went into effect. According to the *Southern Illinoisan*, one attendee went to work for four days before going to the doctor and testing positive for the virus. The article stated, “he actually came to work and was not aware that he was positive and was starting to show some signs and symptoms and worked for about three or four days before he went to the doctor. So, because of the exposure period, he exposed multiple individuals who ended up positive.”

One misconception which has emerged throughout the pandemic is that rural and small towns are generally safer due to the open space and large farms that separate residents. While there may be certain differences in risk and rate of infection between small towns and big cities, rural towns are in no way immune from the pandemic as the situation in southern Illinois attests. In fact, many rural communities are, in many ways, at greater risk due to limited access to hospitals.

According to the Sheps Center for Health Services Research at the University of North Carolina, “At least 68 rural hospitals, or about 4 percent of all rural hospitals in the United States, have closed since 2010.” The Economic Innovation Group reports that “Rural zip codes lost almost 20 percent of their hospital beds between 2006 and 2017.”

Politicians in southern Illinois have lobbied Gov. J.B. Pritzker to allow rural communities to decide on an individual basis when to reopen. Republican State Senator Paul Schimpf from Waterloo said, “shifting decisions to local control would allow county officials to account for the differences in how COVID-19 is affecting different parts of the state. And that may allow for more businesses to reopen in parts of Southern Illinois that have not experienced high case numbers—or crowded hospitals as a result—sooner than parts of Chicago and other large cities that have been harder hit.”

State, local, and federal politicians are doing everything possible to create a sense of calm before the

inevitable storm, using the relatively low numbers of positive COVID-19 cases as an excuse to reopen local economies prematurely.

While the numbers of known COVID-19 cases are relatively lower in southern Illinois than many parts of northern Illinois, it is in no way immune to the virus. Just a little over a month ago, southern Illinois had no reported cases. Within the span of one month COVID-19 cases have emerged and spread in every county in southern Illinois. As the virus continues to spread through rural communities, the infection and death rate will very likely accelerate quickly in these communities which are at a greater risk of becoming overwhelmed by the deadly pandemic.

According to the American Community Survey, rural areas have larger than average populations of people 65 years and older. In fact, the share of the population made up by the elderly has grown from 10.9 percent in 1980 to 17.5 percent in 2017.

Many residents are miles away from the nearest hospital, which may not have the resources to handle a significant surge in patients. Union County, a rural farm community, has only one hospital with a capacity of 25 beds plus 22 long term beds. Chester Memorial Hospital, located in Randolph county has a maximum bed capacity of 27; two of the 27 beds are ICU spaces. The hospitals in rural communities are underfunded and will not be able to meet the demands the pandemic will cause. Six of the southernmost counties in Illinois have no hospitals at all.

Dr. Randall Longenecker, the assistant dean for rural and underserved programs at Heritage College, told *Healthline* magazine “rural hospitals will see an increase in COVID-19 cases start a whole lot later, maybe three weeks, six weeks.” In other words the low number of cases in southern Illinois is preliminary. We can expect a dramatic rise soon in the rural communities within a matter of weeks. It will take more than a couple of weeks to ensure rural communities have the tools and resources to meet a pandemic.



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