

Coronavirus pandemic spreads across the US South

Hospitals overwhelmed in California and Alabama as national death toll approaches 100,000

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Hospitals in Montgomery, Alabama and El Centro, California have been forced to restrict admission of new coronavirus patients after caseloads of COVID-19 spiked during the week. The situation in both cities developed as the number of confirmed cases in the US passed 1.6 million, and the death toll approached 100,000.

The situation in both cities was summed up by Montgomery Mayor Steven Reed, who said yesterday at a press conference, “Right now, if you are from Montgomery and you need an ICU bed, you are in trouble.” Of the state capital’s four regional hospitals, one is short three ICU beds, two have no available ICU beds, and one has just a single ICU bed remaining. Excess patients are being transferred to Birmingham, a trip for those infected of more than an hour.

Reed also warned that the hospitals are “at a capacity that is not sustainable,” and that, “Our health care system is maxed out.”

In El Centro, the increased caseload came from both sides of the US-Mexico border in the wake of relaxed physical distancing rules enacted two weeks ago. According to the CEO of the El Centro Regional Medical Center, Dr. Adolphe Edward, the surge is largely from US citizens who live in Mexicali, a border town in Mexico with a population of 690,000, who were turned away from Mexican hospitals as a result of rising coronavirus infections there.

More than two dozen patients had to be transferred to hospitals in San Diego and other nearby cities, Reuters reports.

This reality did not stop President Donald Trump

from declaring on Friday, “I am identifying houses of worship, churches, synagogues and mosques, as essential places that provide essential services,” and demanding that “governors ... allow our churches and places of worship to open right now.”

Trump’s comments follow his remarks Thursday that the country’s reopening will not be stopped even if the pandemic regains the momentum it had in the previous two months. “Whether it’s an ember or a flame, we’re going to put it out. But we’re not closing our country.” This campaign has added fuel to the record rise of the stock market since its collapse in March, at the expense of tens of thousands of lives and tens of millions of livelihoods.

The spike in cases in such divergent areas of the country is another indication that, contrary to official policy, the spread of the coronavirus pandemic is not slowing but increasing. States including Texas, Florida and Louisiana have joined Alabama and California in seeing an increase of new COVID-19 cases in recent days.

Both the 7- and 14-day moving averages of daily case counts in Alabama are increasing and now stand at above 500 new cases per day. The number of new cases in California has stayed above 2,000 for the past four consecutive days. Texas, where the stay-at-home order expired April 30, saw its new case count on May 21 double to 1,856, as compared to the previous day.

The number of new cases in Florida has also begun to rise, with a sharp increase to 1,204 on Thursday. On that day, the number of new cases in Louisiana increased more than four-fold from the day before, to

1,188 new infections. Total deaths in these states also continue to rise, to 537 in Alabama, 3,682 in California, 1,501 in Texas, 2,190 in Florida and 2,668 in Louisiana.

Texas, Florida and Alabama are also among the states predicted to have even more coronavirus infections over the next four weeks, as modeled by the PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Using cellphone data to track mobility in an attempt to forecast the pandemic, the researchers have found that those states are some of the most at risk for an increased pandemic caseload as their economies continue to reopen.

Another state that has seen a sharp rise in cases is Arkansas, where the number of new infections increased by 228 percent over the past 14 days, bringing the total number of coronavirus cases to 5,612. An outbreak among poultry workers across the state, which now includes 136 active cases, has contributed to the recent rise.

Across the country, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the reopening is driving the spread of the deadly pandemic.

Forcing states to allow religious services to take place will only exacerbate this crisis. Every state now allows some form of public gatherings, including restaurant dining, retail stores, barbershops and salons, beaches and gyms. Some states, such as Louisiana, have even opened movie theaters, museums, zoos and casinos, while Florida has already allowed houses of worship to reopen.

Many of these reopenings are taking place in advance of the Memorial Day weekend. In Wisconsin, the state Supreme Court has allowed bars, clubs, wineries, restaurants and campgrounds to collectively host 158 live music events. While none of these will be in Milwaukee or Madison, due to the large number of cases in those cities, they are expected to draw large crowds, and public health officials are concerned about a resurgence of cases and deaths as a result.

This is particularly concerning in the current pandemic because of the incubation period of the coronavirus. It takes 2-14 days before symptoms appear and even longer before a patient gets tested and possibly hospitalized. "We're looking at potentially a month or two later that we're going to see the impact" of the reopening, said former Baltimore health commissioner Leana Wen to the *Washington Post*.

"You have not seen the impact of reopening yet. I think there's going to be a very significant lag."



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