

Houston hospitals overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients as Texas continues to reopen

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Houston, Texas has the highest number of COVID-19 cases and related deaths in the state, with 43,939 infections and 455 deaths. Dallas, Texas' second-largest city, is in second place. Statewide, COVID-19 cases stand at 258,658, making up around 8 percent of total infections in the country. Texas continues to set new records in terms of those catching and dying from the disease on a weekly basis.

Scenes familiar to what was witnessed in New York in the spring are appearing in Houston. At HCA Northwest Hospital, a refrigerator container truck is parked outside the hospital in preparation for overwhelmed morgues. Emergency rooms and ICUs are packed. The average daily rate of new hospitalizations due to COVID-19 was 360 at the Texas Medical Center hospitals in Houston, almost double the rate from two weeks ago.

This is the context of the murderous back-to-work campaign being pursued by Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who conceded in a leaked May 1 meeting that reopening would “ipso facto” cause an increase in COVID-19 cases. An executive order that mandates masks and a \$250 fine for those not wearing them was signed by Abbott and went into effect on July 3, in an attempt to cover up his criminal role in facilitating the spread of the disease. The governor previously forbade mayors and local governments from requiring the wearing of masks and then quickly rolled back shutdown measures.

The warning made by health professionals and scientists around the world that governments should not reopen too early and that masks are insufficient to prevent disease spread is being vindicated in real time.

In an interview with a KLBK TV reporter on July 10,

Abbott stated that “things will get worse” in relation to the virus. When questioned about what he would do if the mask mandate was “not enough to make a difference soon,” Abbott responded that “the next step would be a lock-down.”

In Harris County, which is in the Houston area and the third most populous county in the country, South East Texas Regional Advisory Council numbers show 1,580 ICU beds out of 1,614 total are in use. In short, there are just 34 beds remaining for the whole county. According to numbers obtained by ProPublica and NBC, as of Thursday, overflow patients are receiving treatment in emergency rooms.

Emergency rooms are neither equipped nor staffed with the specialized personnel required to handle illnesses like COVID-19, which can require an extended period of treatment and special equipment. Rather, they are primarily used to stabilize patients so they can then be sent to the relevant hospital department. A study published in the Academy of Emergency Medicine notes, “Hospital mortality and hospital LOS [length of stay] are associated with length of ED [Emergency Department] boarding.” Another study published in Critical Care Medicine concluded that “prolonged ED boarding times were associated with worse patient outcomes.”

An emergency physician at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Dr. Cedric Dark, speaking with ProPublica, stated, “The problem is you can’t get them [patients] to where they need to be, and now it puts the ER doc in the position of having to function like the hospitalist or the intensive care doctor, and that’s not a role that we’re really supposed to be in.” The boarding of patients in emergency rooms causes additional

problems for non-coronavirus patients, since it “slows down the beginning of care for somebody who needs hospitalization, and the beginning of care for any medical condition is the most crucial period of time.”

This fact is illuminated in an increase in at-home deaths due to the inundation of hospitals with coronavirus patients. An investigation by ProPublica found that there has been a 45 percent rise in cardiac arrest calls that “ended up with paramedics declaring people dead at the scene” in the Houston area since February, with 250 dead-on-arrival calls in March and 300 in June, topping previous records for these months.

Esmaeil Porsa, CEO of Harris Health System, the public hospital system in Harris county, which includes two full-service hospitals, speaking to ProPublica, said that, due to the lack of ICU beds, patients would “continue to board in the emergency room” and stated that the treatment given in the ER is “not an optimal level of care. The only reason this is happening is because we are being forced to do it.”



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