As Midwest states experience record surge in cases

North and South Dakota record fastest growing COVID-19 outbreak in US

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As President Donald Trump returned from his Walter Reed Army Medical Center suite to tell Americans not to worry about the coronavirus, both North Dakota and South Dakota reported the highest per capita infection rates in the country this week.

On Wednesday, South Dakota reported the highest number of per capita cases in the US, according to data from John's Hopkins, with around 57 cases per 100,000 residents. North Dakota followed slightly behind, with roughly 56 cases per 100,000 residents.

Cases and deaths are rapidly rising in North and South Dakota, mainly due to the refusal of state leaders to implement preventive measures. The surge comes just two months after the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally at which nearly 500,000 people converged in western South Dakota for a week of partying in August, with most attendees flouting measures aimed at limiting the virus's spread, such as wearing masks.

In North Dakota, COVID-19-related hospitalizations and new cases have hit record highs for the previous two days. Active new cases rose to 3,964 on Thursday, as well as total cases to 26,040 and active hospitalizations to 132. New cases in North Dakota also increased to a record-breaking 527 for the state. These figures were compounded by the reports of 41 deaths in the past three days out of 321 total for the state.

South Dakota faces a similar sharp rise in COVID-19 cases and deaths, breaking previous records in previous days. On Wednesday, South Dakota saw a record 1,030 new cases reported, and the total active cases surpassed 5,000 on Thursday. In the past three days, 29 people died from COVID-19 in South Dakota out of 272 total deaths, pointing to a growing number of deaths.

This growth will be exacerbated in both North and South Dakota due to the lack of major hospitals, since the states are sparsely populated in mostly small towns and rural areas. Last year, North Dakota population numbers were just above 762,000, and South Dakota population numbers were over 884,000.

As a major meat processing state, South Dakota was a target of Trump's April 29 Executive Order invoking the Defense Production Act, keeping large facilities open and shielding meatpacking plants and other large corporations deemed "critical infrastructure" from any liability for infecting workers and their families. Workers in Sioux Falls protested in April, demanding protections from the coronavirus after some 300 contracted the disease at a Smithfield Foods plant in the city.

Both states' governments did not respond to the initial wave of COVID-19 with lockdowns, instead requiring workers to remain at work with the risk of a deadly infection and spreading it to their families and throughout their communities.

Earlier this week, Trump tweeted to endorse Republican South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem's response to COVID-19, sharing a clip from a speech she gave to lawmakers reinforcing her decision not to lock down the state. Gov. Noem hailed the supposed success of her government's response as "proof of how useless [lockdowns] really had been."

Noem thanked Trump in response to his tweet. "Thank you, Mr. President, for giving South Dakota the flexibility to respect Freedom and personal responsibility," she wrote. "We based our decisions on science, facts, and data, and our people stepped up!"

Given the now record high infection rate in her state, this serves to reinforce the fact that the basis on which

the ruling class determines the effectiveness of the response to coronavirus is the profits of major corporations and the rate at which surplus value can be extracted from the working class.

Across the nation, daily new COVID-19 cases have been steadily growing. Last week, cases grew by five percent in more than 30 states, based on Johns Hopkins data. The pandemic is seeing a rapid surge especially in the Midwest, where Wisconsin now follows behind North Dakota and South Dakota with the fastest growing outbreak and record positivity rates among those being tested.

Hospitals in northeastern Wisconsin are being overwhelmed by record numbers of patients. More than 900 people are hospitalized with COVID-19 across the state as of Friday, an all-time high, and of these more than 200 patients are in intensive care units.

Dr. Paul Casey, the director of Bellin Health Systems in Green Bay, told CNBC's Shepard Smith on Thursday that hospital beds have been at or near capacity for the last week. "We are on the verge of a crisis in Green Bay and our surrounding counties," Casey said.

Wisconsin governor Tony Evers is planning to open a state-run emergency field hospital on Wednesday at the State Fair Park in Milwaukee to help ease the pressure on health care systems across the state. The operation will have a 530-bed capacity and be open to those with less severe cases not requiring intensive care from hospitals across the state.

Minnesota, Indiana and Nebraska are also marking record highs for average new cases. Cases are also surging further west in the states of Montana and Colorado, portending a difficult winter across the country as the US remains a global epicenter for the virus.

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