

Missouri hospitals face being overwhelmed in latest surge of COVID-19 infections

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Missouri hospital administrators and public health officials are raising the alarm over the possibility of hospitals being overwhelmed by COVID-19 cases, asking for help in managing a patient transfer crisis and demanding Republican Governor Mike Parson issue a mask mandate in order to get the spread of the virus under control. On Sunday, the state reported 2,152 new cases of COVID-19.

The overwhelming of hospital resources is the most significant factor in COVID-19 mortality. The St. Louis area is experiencing a dangerous increase in cases and hospitalizations, although rural areas of the state continue to see the highest numbers of cases. In Missouri, as in much of the US, the month of October saw the largest number of COVID-19 infections of the pandemic so far. Stltoday.com reports nearly 500 residents are currently in intensive care units in the state.

St. Louis Metro Pandemic Task Force leader Dr. Alex Garza reported October 21 that about 90 percent of beds were full in the SSM Health system. For the entire metro, the hospital bed occupancy rate is 85 percent. "Speaking with our task force hospitals yesterday that same sort of level was echoed across all the hospitals from St. Luke's to Mercy to BJC," Dr. Garza said. "We normally don't operate at that high of a level."

Garza issued an emotional plea for the public to take the pandemic seriously. He fought back tears as he explained that area hospitals are at or near capacity due to COVID-19 admissions. "If we continue down the path we're on right now, if we don't start listening to science and wear masks and stop gathering in large crowds, things could potentially get much worse."

He also noted that hospital staff shortages are a worry as more healthcare workers contract the virus caring for the sick. "In addition to being full, we're also seeing an increasing number of our workforce is being exposed to COVID, not necessarily in the hospitals, but out in the community, so then they become quarantined for two weeks. It's not just only a question of increased volume of COVID patients, it's also COVID out in the community is causing problems with the workforce, so we're decreasing our capability to take care of patients as well."

In the latest meeting between state officials and hospital administrators, Texas County Memorial Hospital CEO Wesley

Murray said, "I respectfully ask what is our plan to address the increased cases and hospitalizations? We don't seem to have a plan to try to decrease the cases and the hospitalizations."

The Missouri Hospital Association is warning of statewide staff shortages as essential workers become ill or quit due to burnout. The turnover for state nurses is reportedly 16 percent.

Amid the worsening situation for hospitals, Missouri school districts are continuing to send students back to class despite the quarantine of hundreds of Missouri students and school faculty, with no end in sight to outbreaks.

On October 22, 150 students at Sullivan School District were quarantined in Franklin and Crawford counties. In St. Louis County, Rockwood School District plans to have middle and high school students return to in-person classes next month. Some districts will have their entire student bodies return later. Riverview Gardens School District plans to have pre-kindergarten through fifth grade students return throughout November, with middle and high school students returning January 4, 2021.

In an acknowledgment of parents' fears regarding the virus, most districts allow individual families the option to continue online-only instruction for their children. The Ferguson-Florissant and Maplewood Richmond Heights school districts will have all-online learning into January.

KSDK News reported on the harrowing illness of Deryl Cunningham, basketball coach at Highland High School in Madison County, Illinois, east of St. Louis. Cunningham contracted COVID-19 early this month and suffered severe complications including kidney failure. He is currently undergoing dialysis and is on the emergency kidney transplant list.

In a reminder of the criminally inadequate state of the United States healthcare system, the local community has had to raise funds for Cunningham's treatments. "We have a GoFundMe account that's about \$25,000 or more and the original goal was only \$10,000," Evan Peterson, a basketball player at the school, told KSDK. "We've sent gift cards, flowers and other stuff to his family. We just kind of keep in touch with them whenever they need us because we know he'd be there for us."

Students are as concerned as teachers about getting sick or passing COVID-19 on to others. Students of the Parkway

School District in St. Louis County published a letter in *Pathfinder*, the official student publication of Parkway West High School. The letter admonishes the Parkway Board of Education for reversing their policy of keeping students at home. The young writers passionately argue that for the sake of saving lives, school should not yet resume in-person instruction.

"The moment we send students back into classrooms, we accept a lost cause. The district likes to make a case for the shiny new ventilation systems in our buildings; however, the fact remains that no matter how great these systems might be, the virus is transmitted much more easily indoors than out."

The letter points out that the Board is potentially sacrificing the lives of staff and students by giving in to demands from parents—and though these writers don't explicitly state as such, the county and state government—to have students return to classrooms.

"You succumbed to the incessant cries and protests of parents and students who were simply being loud. They wanted the district to acknowledge their right to a choice; this right can be exercised when the consequences of the choice don't negatively affect anybody but the person making a choice. COVID-19 does not allow room for choice. COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease, and you put an entire community at higher risk when you provide people with the choice to learn in-person." Sixth through eighth grade Parkway students began returning to class October 27.

Most Missouri school districts have seen elementary students return. There is no state plan for mass COVID-19 testing in the school districts, nor do most districts practice it themselves. Plexiglass barriers at desks mean little as the virus is aerosolized when students, teachers and staff breathe or speak.

Rural districts may stop in-person instruction for short periods in the case of outbreaks but there is no plan to mandate online instruction for all schools in the state. Neelyville School District in Butler County closed its schools October 19-23 after 18 students and eight staff tested positive. Fifty-one students were placed into quarantine. Arcadia Valley R-II Schools, in Iron County, went to online instruction October 28-30 due to an increase in cases. The school district of Marshall, Missouri, will have online instruction for elementary students until November 3.

One of the difficulties of transitioning to online learning for rural communities is inadequate or nonexistent broadband coverage. The communities of Stoutland and Eldridge, in Laclede and Camden counties, are only now getting broadband set up as the result of a \$91.5 million United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant to the state. Missouricom will deploy broadband to the communities as well as others in Laclede, Dallas and Camden counties, providing vital internet service to 2,390 people, 78 farms and 12 businesses.

Children and youth are growing severely ill from COVID-19 in Missouri, putting lie to claims of President Donald Trump

and other political leaders that almost all youth suffer little or no effects from being infected.

Twenty-year-old Ronnae Gordon, a student of Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, suffered terrible effects after contracting the disease in August. The *Rolla Daily News* reported that Gordon initially thought she had a urinary tract infection from previous issues with her kidneys. A few days after initial symptoms she was admitted to an emergency room with excruciating pain and a fever of over 100.

Gordon told the *Daily News*, "I was terrified. It didn't even occur to me that I could have COVID and that could be contributing to my symptoms." She was diagnosed with sepsis, an extreme immune reaction. Upon discharge from the hospital it took her weeks to feel better. "I couldn't stay awake for more than two hours before I got so exhausted, I would fall back asleep," she said. "I had no energy. I had no motivation to do anything." Gordon still has not completely recovered as her existing epilepsy and Alpha-Gal syndrome (which makes her allergic to meat from mammals) were worsened by her COVID-19 illness.

Entire families are at risk of illness, permanent disability and death. Erin Griffin of St. Louis was interviewed on the deaths of three of her family members. Her mother and two uncles, aged 72 and 74, died from the virus in April and May. Griffin contracted it herself as she was taking care of her mother, grandmother and one of her uncles who lived in the same residence. "It really is surreal. Honestly, I can't explain it to you. I'm not coping," Griffin said of her ordeal. "I just want to go somewhere and lie down. I don't want to hear anyone or anything. It's taken a toll on my entire family."



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