COVID-19 cuts through Missouri and Kansas uncontrolled

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Hospitalizations of patients with COVID-19 are soaring in the state of Missouri as the virus cuts through the population uncontrolled. The state of Missouri reported 4,256 cases on Tuesday and 146 new deaths. The state does not mandate masks in bars and restaurants.

According to the state's COVID-19 dashboard, every county in the state has a testing positivity rate between 7 percent and 28 percent, with 16 counties over 20 percent and another 5 counties reporting 19 percent.

The Missouri Hospital Association (MHA) reported multiple forms of strain on the state's health care infrastructure, in addition to thousands of COVID-19 patients, including staffing shortages, "seasonal increases for respiratory and other illnesses" and "pent-up demand from the spring pandemic-related shutdowns."

MHA spokesman Dave Dillon expressed concern about hospital capacity, resources and staffing, "If we continue to have these high rates, we are going to have this continued demand on the resource, and it's going to be very difficult to build out capacity."

Hospitalizations again hit another high Tuesday at 2,055 across the state, and some St. Louis-area hospitals are postponing elective procedures. In St. Louis and in the central part of the state, hospitals are reporting the largest number of patients since April. On November 6, the MHA reported more than 2,000 were hospitalized with COVID-19. Columbia-area hospitals report being near capacity.

Jefferson County reported record cases November 6. On that date the county had a positivity rate of 23 percent and a total of 7,318 cases. This recent outbreak was traced to three Halloween parties held in the county without social distancing measures.

Rather than taking immediate and decisive action to mitigate the spread of the disease in the state, recently reelected Republican Governor Mike Parson is touting the vaccine currently in development by Pfizer, which the company recently touted as 90 percent effective, as an impending solution. Parson and his administration are using the announcement to dismiss the need for any new preventive measures and taking his reelection as an endorsement of the state government's lethal "open for business" approach to the pandemic.

Department of Health and Senior Services Director Randall Williams told the Missouri House Special Committee on Disease Control and Prevention, "I believe that the path to get back to normal is now lighted, and that path is this vaccine." Williams also said he expects the new COVID-19 vaccine to be distributed on a limited basis next month.

However, in a November 1 report the White House Coronavirus Task Force urged Missouri to reduce indoor dining, issue a mask mandate, and put a brake on the "unrelenting spread and increasing new hospital admissions."

In warning the governor of the coming public health catastrophe, hospital executives have also pressed the state for a mask mandate. The state does not have a mask mandate, and schools are reopening without masks being required in all areas. Meanwhile, some local municipalities are issuing mask mandates in limited areas, like government buildings and schools.

Kansas City straddles the states of Missouri and Kansas and includes the most populous county in the state of Kansas, Johnson County. The rate of COVID-19 infections in Johnson County is "increasing exponentially," according to Sanmi Arreola, Johnson County Department of Health and Environment director. More than 800 students and staff of Shawnee Mission School District are isolating or in quarantine.

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Arreola continued, “I will say, we are very concerned—very, very concerned—not about the health and safety of students, about the health and safety of teachers and staff, but the safety of our residents in general. The numbers are high. That increases risk for everyone.”

Twenty Kansas State football players are out with the disease, according to coach Chris Klieman, and at least one Catholic school switched to remote learning due to an outbreak among students. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment announced on Tuesday it is lowering the frequency of its COVID-19 updates to Monday, Wednesday and Friday, even as the number of infections skyrockets. Over the weekend, the state reported close to 6,000 cases in a state with a population of just under three million people.

Throughout Missouri, thousands of students and the faculties who serve them are dealing with virus outbreaks, quarantines and cancellations of classes. Almost half of the 468 students at Mehlville School District’s (St. Louis County) Washington Middle School were kept off campus for two weeks beginning October 28, after potential exposure to four people who were on campus and later tested positive. In mid-Missouri, the California School District (Moniteau County) moved to remote learning November 5. The previous day, the district posted on its Facebook page that 273 students and faculty were quarantined, and an additional 25 people had tested positive.

The Lee’s Summit North High School football team played their last game October 23 before canceling the rest of the season due to a player testing positive. Kansas City, Missouri’s Rockhurst High School also canceled its season. Despite schools continually quarantining students and reimplementing online instruction, the financially lucrative college sports industry must go on—Kansas State University announced that basketball games will play with 25 percent attendance capacity.

The first child to die from COVID-19 in Missouri was 13-year-old Peyton Baumgarth, who lived with his family in the city of Washington, west of St. Louis. He died at the hospital on October 31 shortly after being quarantined on October 26.

Parkway School District was set to have kindergarten through eighth grade students return to a full-time in-class schedule but changed course to a blended learning schedule due to increased local COVID-19 cases. This was the school district where the Parkway West High School student newsletter denounced the Parkway Board of Education for allowing in-person instruction during the pandemic. The same situation is happening at St. Louis City’s Saint Louis Public Schools. As of now, older students in the district will continue with all-online instruction indefinitely.

Rural hospitals in the Missouri Ozarks have been forced to hire travel nurses to keep up with rising hospitalizations. Travel nurses must weigh the additional income with the desire to keep themselves safe. “Is the financial gain worth it? Are you gonna be around to enjoy whatever money you made because you’re putting your health at risk?” travel nurse Lori Swann, who came from Georgia to work at Mercy St. Francis in Mountain View, remarked in an interview with KY3 News.

That there has been progress in the development of a vaccine against COVID-19 is encouraging, but it makes even more necessary urgent intervention to contain the spread of the virus and save lives until the vaccine is widely available. In Missouri, as it is across the US, Europe and elsewhere, the unfolding public health catastrophe is the immediate consequence of government policy being dictated by the interests of profit.

If emergency action is not taken now, hundreds of thousands more around the world will die before a vaccine is widely available. Residents of Missouri, Kansas and other states need to form local rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighborhood.

The first step has been taken with workers at the Ford Kansas City Assembly Plant forming a rank-and-file safety committee to defend against the spread of coronavirus in their facility. The WSWS will assist in the building of a fightback against the murderous policies of the Missouri government and the capitalist system it defends.

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