

Flint, Michigan nurse dies from COVID-19

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The tragic death of Santa Staples, an operating room nurse at McLaren Hospital in Flint, is the latest in the growing number of avoidable deaths from the coronavirus pandemic. Staples died Saturday. Just before her death, she had been recovering at home from unrelated surgery, friends and family said. Her prognosis was promising, but then she started having trouble breathing. At that point she was diagnosed with the coronavirus and admitted to the same health system where she worked for thirty-three years. Nicknamed “Santa Baby” because she was born on Christmas Day, Staples was 59 years old.

More than fifty doctors, nurses and other health care workers held a vigil in the parking lot across from the hospital on Monday night for the much-loved and respected Staples. Co-workers who were still on their shifts gathered at hospital windows, waving cell phone lights in the dark to show support. Her colleagues and family described Staples as a tireless front-line fighter for her patients and her co-workers.

Rhonda Cavalry, an RN who knew Staples for many years, told the *Detroit Free Press*, “People are dying and it’s senseless. She shouldn’t have died. And those workers in there are working with them every day. We have two floors now that are full of COVID patients again. We’re going right back to where we were last March.” More than 2,800 Michigan residents are currently hospitalized with COVID-19.

Three hospital staff workers at McLaren Flint have died from COVID-19 as well as three spouses of health care staff, but this number is very likely an underestimation as the state of Michigan does not keep track of how many health care workers have died from the virus. A spokesperson for McLaren Flint did not respond to questions about how many health care workers had died nor how many were currently quarantined. Like workers in factories, schools and other workplaces, hospital workers are being kept in the

dark about the number of coronavirus infections and deaths.

The pandemic is raging uncontrollably throughout the United States, as herd immunity is the policy of the ruling elite and both capitalist parties to defend profits at the expense of human life. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention more than 192,000 health care workers have been infected and at least 771 have died.

The heavily industrialized Midwest is the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States where the auto plants are becoming vectors for the spread of infections and deaths. Playing a criminal role in overseeing this unfolding catastrophe are the United Auto Workers (UAW) as well as the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), representing many Michigan health care workers. These organizations are working with auto companies and health care providers to cover up the full extent of the infections and to oppose the measures needed to protect the lives of workers.

According to Worldometers.com the number of new COVID-19 cases is skyrocketing in Michigan. In just one month new daily cases jumped from 1,648 on Oct. 10 to 6,944 on Nov. 10, a 322 percent increase. Even more alarming is the increase of active cases from 42,724 to 108,177 in the last 30 days, a 153 percent hike.

In March, during the first wave of COVID-19, hospitals were running out of supplies. Since then supplies have increased with a goal of a 90-day supply of five main PPE items including N95 masks, surgical masks, gloves, gowns and protective eyewear, to prepare for the new surge. However, according to John Karasinski, a spokesperson for the Michigan Health and Hospital Association, which represents all 133 community hospitals in the state, the supply is rapidly dwindling.

At Ascension Michigan's 16 hospitals, surgical masks are in short supply, with only enough to stretch up to six days. At the Ann Arbor-based Michigan Medicine, the health system affiliated with the University of Michigan, there is a 7 to 14-day supply of surgical masks. Many other PPE supplies will last only up to six days.

Even more concerning is the shortage of staffing, especially nurses and respiratory therapists, and available hospital beds. Nearly 1.5 million health care workers were laid off in May in the midst of the pandemic. During the summer, Michigan Medicine eliminated 1,400 positions through forced retirements and "voluntary" furloughs, including the layoff of 738 nurses, technicians and other health care workers. In Detroit, Beaumont Health laid off nearly 2,500 hospital workers, while Detroit Medical Center furloughed 480 employees. The Henry Ford Health System furloughed some 2,800 workers in its six hospitals located across the Detroit metro area.

At the end of October state data showed several Michigan hospitals were more than 80 percent full:

- Hurley Hospital was at 97 percent capacity, with 29 hospitalized COVID-19 patients, of whom six were in the ICU.

- Covenant HealthCare was at 92 percent capacity with 66 hospitalized COVID-19 patients, of whom 15 were in the ICU.

- Prime Health was 90 percent full, with nine hospitalized COVID-19 patients, two of whom were in the ICU.

- Holland Community Hospital was at 89 percent capacity with 23 hospitalized COVID-19 patients.

- Michigan Medicine was 86 percent full, with 29 hospitalized COVID-19 patients, of whom 12 were in the ICU.

- Ascension Michigan's hospitals were 83 percent

full, with 216 hospitalized COVID-19 patients, of whom 49 were in the ICU.

Of the state's 2,459 adult intensive care unit beds, just 471 remain available.

This appalling state of affairs threatens to get even worse as coronavirus cases increase exponentially in the face of the failure of public officials at all levels to take the emergency measures needed to stem the virus. Countless lives are being put at risk due to the total subordination of all aspects of economic and social life to the profit demands of the banks and corporations.



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