

Metro Detroit hospitalizations rise sharply as second wave of COVID-19 cases surges across Michigan

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Hospitalizations of people infected with COVID-19 in the Detroit metropolitan area increased dramatically last weekend as a second wave of the pandemic surged across Michigan and dwarfed the case numbers of last spring.

A report in *Bridge Magazine* on Monday said that hospitals “in metro Detroit’s six counties are treating over 1,300 patients, up 200 from Friday alone.” Among the hospital systems facing the COVID-19 surge are Beaumont Health, which has experienced an increase in cases from 172 on Oct. 25 to 377 on Sunday, the report said.

Dr. Nick Gilpin, Beaumont Health’s director of infection prevention epidemiology, said, “We’ve had a notable rise in COVID-19 cases in metro Detroit. Community positivity rates have jumped to 8–11 percent in the area.”

The number of daily coronavirus cases in Michigan reached 6,473 on Wednesday, which is more than three times greater than the peak of 1,953 last April during the early days of the pandemic. There have been a total of 217,000 confirmed cases and 7,600 deaths from the pandemic in Michigan.

According to data maintained by the state of Michigan, the major hospitals in metro Detroit, including Ascension Health, Beaumont Health, Detroit Medical Center, Henry Ford Health System, McLaren Health, Michigan Medicine and Trinity Health, all had bed occupancy of between 75 percent and 85 percent as of Wednesday. These seven hospital networks have a total of 1,670 COVID-19 cases, with 340 patients in intensive care.

The surge in cases and hospitalizations has forced many hospitals to restrict visitor access. Henry Ford Health System issued a statement on Tuesday saying that, while the hospital “recognizes the importance of the support by loved ones during a patient’s hospitalization,” the

decision to restrict visitation and limit family presence is based on “the health and safety of our patients, our team members and others in our facilities.”

Dave Coulter, executive of Oakland County, a suburban county north of Detroit, said during a live Facebook event on Tuesday, “Over the weekend our seven-day average for confirmed cases spiked to over 400 per day for the first time. That’s a pace of over 2,800 COVID-19 cases per week.”

Hospitalizations across the state of Michigan have quadrupled since Oct. 1. Ruthanne Sudderth, spokeswoman for the Michigan Health and Hospital Association, told *Bridge Magazine*, “We are getting close to a point where people won’t be able to get care for COVID” or other health issues.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) renewed contracts on Oct. 1 with Suburban Collection shopping mall in Novi and TCF Convention Center in downtown Detroit to be used as backup emergency hospital bed facilities. Lynn Sutfin, spokesperson for MDHHS, said, “We hope that additional hospitalization space isn’t needed, but we are incredibly concerned about the increasing cases and hospitalizations.”

Sutfin added, “Although our hospitalizations are not what they were during the spring surge, over half of COVID-19 inpatients are outside of Southeast Michigan. We are concerned about what may happen if hospitals become overwhelmed.”

According to a report in the *Detroit Free Press*, the Michigan health care system is not prepared for the surge in cases. Hospital medical executives warn that the systems do not have adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or staffing—especially nurses and respiratory specialists—to handle a surge that lasts for a

prolonged period.

Dr. Lydia Watson, senior vice president and chief medical officer of MidMichigan Health, which has medical centers in Alpena, Clare, Gladwin, Gratiot, Midland, Mount Pleasant and West Branch, said, “We currently have adequate supplies—anywhere from seven to 30 days of everything that we need.” Watson warned that if there is a significant increase in patient loads, this might not be enough.

Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer told news media on Tuesday that her administration was investigating “next steps” to combat the surge that has been building since mid-June and took off exponentially at the beginning of October. The governor said she was “having ongoing regular conversations” with MDHHS about how to handle the increase.

In early October, the Michigan Supreme Court struck down as unconstitutional a law that the governor had used to issue previous stay-at-home orders and other executive declarations pertaining to the pandemic. Whitmer has since used the authorities of MDHSS to implement measures such as a new mask mandate, but the Republican-controlled legislature is continuing to obstruct such rules.

While the Democrats are presenting the present surge as the singular product of the reduction of gubernatorial executive authority, the fact is that both the Democrats and Republicans in Michigan have worked together to ensure that the economy was reopened despite the ongoing and grave threat posed to public health. Both parties have supported the drive by employers to force workers back into the factories and workplaces and to get schoolchildren back into the schools.

As reported on the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday, a wide-ranging cover-up of new infections has been underway in the auto industry as demonstrated at the FCA Sterling Heights Stamping Plant (SSP). In the first ten days of November, there have been nearly the same number of infections of auto workers at SSP as all of October. While at least 22 FCA workers have died from COVID-19 since production was resumed in May, the company has not reported anything to workers since the end of June.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the working class and poorest sections of the population have borne the brunt of the social and economic impact of COVID-19. For example, the overall health of workers in Detroit—including an epidemic of underlying conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and other respiratory

ailments that compromise the immune system—combined with a lack of access to adequate health care services, effectively turns an infection with coronavirus into a death sentence.

A report in *Bloomberg Businessweek* on Oct. 21 revealed the fact that the working class population in an area in southwest Detroit, near the zip code 48217, has been poisoned by industrial pollution for decades. The article states, “People in 48217 live on average seven fewer years than in the country as a whole, and asthma hospitalization rates in the area are more than twice as high as those of Michigan and about five times higher than those of the US.”

The residential area, where 40 percent of the population lives in poverty, is in very close proximity to two dozen major industrial sites including “mills run by U.S. Steel and the mining company Cleveland-Cliffs, as well as DTE Energy’s River Rouge coal-fired power station, a Great Lakes Water Authority treatment facility, an oil refinery, a drywall manufacturer, a salt pile, a lime quarry, three scrap-metal processors, a chemical plant, four concrete suppliers, an asphalt maker, Ford’s River Rouge production facility.”

Although *Bloomberg* attempts to present the impact of these conditions on the health of the working class as a race issue—one of the neighborhoods is 80 percent African American—the reality is that this area of the city is one of most ethnically integrated in all of Detroit.

Medical experts are coming to the conclusion that long-term exposure to air pollution makes it very difficult for the immune system to fight off the coronavirus infection of the respiratory system. *Bloomberg* quotes Francesca Dominici, a professor of biostatistics at Harvard, who published an article showing that death rates from COVID-19 are connected with even modest increases in long-term pollution exposure.

Dominici said, “If you live in a community where you’ve been exposed to all kinds of toxicants and air pollutants, we know that your lungs have been inflamed for a very long time before, and if you contract the virus, your ability to respond to the virus is compromised.”



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