

North Dakota reaches 100 percent hospital capacity, tells health care workers to continue working if infected with COVID-19

Alex Findijs
11 November 2020

The Governor of North Dakota, Republican Doug Burgum, announced during a news conference on Monday that hospitals have reached 100 percent capacity across the state due to the rapid spike in cases of COVID-19.

North Dakota has become the epicenter of the outbreaks occurring in the Midwest, with daily cases breaching 1,000 last week and active cases reaching 11,719 on November 10. Over 1.5 percent of the entire state population is currently infected with the virus.

Total cases have surpassed 56,000 and total deaths are closing in on 700, twice the number of one month ago. Of the 30 COVID-related deaths on Monday, a third were from the Bismarck area. And in Ward County, which has seen 83 deaths in total, two-thirds have come in just the last two weeks.

The rapid rise in cases across the state has put the health care system on the brink of collapse. As of November 10, there are 383 patients hospitalized for COVID-19, with 48 of them in the intensive care unit. With 20 percent of all hospital beds filled by coronavirus patients, North Dakota hospitals are filled to capacity and face a shortage of staff.

In a desperate bid to avoid staff shortages amidst the crisis, the North Dakota government has issued an order that allows nurses who have tested positive for the virus to continue working if they exhibit an asymptomatic condition.

This decision came at the request of hospital administrators, who are terrified by the prospect of losing staff during a dire health emergency which is growing worse by the day.

The extreme decision is recommended by the Strategies to Mitigate Healthcare Personnel Staffing

Shortages update on July 17, issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Allowing sick nurses to work is considered a “crisis capacity strategy” for workers who are “well enough and willing,” and is considered a last-ditch effort to maintain adequate staffing, highlighting the severity of the situation in North Dakota

In order to prevent transmission by infected health care personnel, the CDC recommends that they be given the opportunity to conduct telework first. If conditions require them to work on site then they should only interact with infected patients and should be prohibited from contact with immunocompromised patients. CDC guidelines recommend that infected health care workers should only interact with infected patients if necessary, and working with non-infected patients is a “last resort.”

The CDC also notes that infected health care workers can still transmit the virus to coworkers, and provisions should be made to distance infected workers from other staff. This will be a difficult task for hospitals and it is likely that infected workers will transmit the virus to their coworkers even with precautionary measures taken.

North Dakota has progressed to the stage of allowing infected workers to care for infected patients in hospitals and nursing homes already.

Regardless of whether keeping infected workers on the job can be done safely, it is clear that the necessity to do so is the product of negligent health policies pursued by Governor Burgum.

The first-term Republican governor has refused to issue a mask mandate for the state, opting instead to merely encourage residents to wear them. The

developing crisis has since tempered Burgum's opposition to mask requirements somewhat, with the governor saying he was open to allowing local ordinances on the issue.

The urban centers of Bismarck, Grand Forks, Williston and Fargo have passed local mask mandates in response to the pandemic, but most of the mask mandates around the state carry no punishment for failing to comply.

The most that Burgum has done was raising the risk level in all North Dakota counties to "high risk." This comes with recommendations that all restaurants, bars and event venues operate at 25 percent capacity. Throughout the entire pandemic Burgum has never once raised a risk level to "critical," which would require the closure of businesses and a mandatory stay-at-home order.

Burgum is clearly toeing the line of President Donald Trump, who has consistently lied about the danger of the pandemic and promoted the policy of "herd immunity" which places profit over lives. He has contradicted the scientific work of the CDC, claiming that "shutting down the economy doesn't necessarily slow the spread" of the virus.

This is of course false.

A recent study published by the CDC on the lockdown in Italy concluded that the lockdown was instrumental in bringing the virus under control.

On the question of herd immunity, the World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that "attempts to reach 'herd immunity' through exposing people to a virus are scientifically problematic and unethical. Letting COVID-19 spread through populations, of any age or health status will lead to unnecessary infections, suffering and death."

The positivity rate in North Dakota is currently around 19 percent, indicating uncontrolled spread and a severe lack of testing. If nothing is done to stop the spread of the virus now, North Dakota, a state of just 760,000 people, may see tens of thousands more fall ill, and thousands die.

The policies of the North Dakota government, in the face of full hospital capacity and continuously rising cases, are a clear sign that the state government is placing profits over people, and that the policy of herd immunity has no scientific validity.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact