

Prisoners load bodies into mobile morgues in El Paso, Texas as COVID-19 infections skyrocket

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El Paso, Texas, which is still being slammed by a flood of COVID-19 cases, pushing its hospital systems to overcapacity, is now being strained by the gruesome overflow of bodies awaiting autopsy. According to Channel 9 KTSM, a local affiliate of NBC, El Paso County Jail inmates are being used to assist in loading bodies into the 10 mobile overflow morgues that stand outside the medical examiner's office.

The inmates are being paid \$2 per hour in 8-hour shifts on a voluntary basis to help move bodies under the careful watch of a sheriff's deputy and two detention officers. A video posted on social media shows men in black and white striped prison uniforms and personal protective equipment carting a body and placing it on a rack in the back of a refrigerated trailer.

The grim scene is reminiscent of the disaster which unfolded in New York City in the spring when refrigerated trailers were parked outside hospitals to hold bodies and a mass grave was dug on Hart Island. El Paso County has recorded 762 COVID-19-related deaths, the majority coming since September.

While there is no sign that the situation is easing, businesses in the county began to reopen Friday after an appeals court ruled that the county's one-month-long shutdown of nonessential businesses violated state-wide reopening orders issued by Republican Texas Governor Greg Abbott.

The state's Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton, who had joined a group of restaurant owners in challenging the temporary shutdown, hailed the ruling and denounced El Paso County Judge Ricardo Samaniego as a "tyrant" for implementing basic public health measures aimed at controlling the spread of the virus. "I will not let rogue political subdivisions try to

kill small businesses and holiday gatherings through unlawful executive orders," Paxton crowed on Twitter.

For communities across the United States, attempts to return to a form of normalcy—whether it be college football games in giant stadiums packed with spectators rushing the field, celebrating weddings that have been scheduled months in advance, or clandestine homecoming celebrations—have led to outbreaks and super-spreader events.

Despite the repeat of horrific scenes of the initial wave of the pandemic, local governments continue to subordinate public health to the profit interests of big businesses and the stock market, as demonstrated by their continued rejection of lockdown measures and preference to blame people for their irresponsible behaviors.

Such references to personal behavior are a malicious component of the bipartisan "herd immunity" policy which has encouraged reckless behavior from the beginning of the pandemic.

Friday saw the most dramatic surge to date in new cases, which exceeded 180,000. The seven-day moving average for fatalities has climbed to 1,142, a 60 percent rise from precisely one month ago. Hospitalizations across the nation have reached near 70,000.

President Donald Trump has continued to refuse to order a national lockdown. In the same vein, Democratic President-elect Joe Biden's transition team knocked down calls for a lockdown with full compensation for workers, preferring to align the team's strategy along the lines of pushing for more public health measures—more testing, contact tracing and mask mandates—which cannot be enforced. These measures will not halt the fuel feeding the raging fire

that is the pandemic.

The rapidly deteriorating situation in Oklahoma is another critical case study in the ongoing lack of government response to the worst phase of the pandemic. Over two weeks, the number of daily cases has doubled, now standing at around 2,000 over a seven-day average. Yesterday, the state posted a record high of 2,800 confirmed COVID-19 infections, a rate of 46 per 100,000 population, which is much higher than across the country, which stands at 40 per 100,000.

In Oklahoma County, home to the state's capital and largest city, Oklahoma City, the current rate is 67 per 100,000. The positivity rate has more than doubled to 20 percent, with one in five tests positive for infection. Of the 520 deaths in the state, 34.3 percent have occurred in long-term care facilities.

The state has about 918 intensive care units, of which non-COVID-19 patients currently occupy 569 (62 percent). Of the 349 ICU beds left, 362 are required for coronavirus cases, pushing capacity utilization over 100 percent. This means that hospitals are currently unable to absorb a new wave of COVID-19 patients without quickly reaching surge capacity.

The Oklahoma State Department of Health has estimated that they need 9,960 contact tracers and staff to trace all contacts to known cases within a two-day window. Beyond this time, the effectiveness of tracing drops drastically, which is why rapid COVID-19 tests with immediate results are a critical component of containment measures. According to the best data available, Oklahoma has only 700 contact tracers, or 7 percent of the needed minimum.

A video aired on Channel 8ABC Tulsa, produced by INTEGRIS Health, provides a harrowing behind-the-scenes look at an ICU where health care workers are treating COVID patients. Dr. David Chansolme, the medical director of infection prevention, says while a nurse is managing 10 intravenous pumps, "This is what we call the ICU thicket. Look at how many pumps [there are]. This is one patient. It takes a NASA engineering degree to be able to run all of these lines on one single patient."

The video brings home the point that an inundated health system working with an incapacitated or exhausted critical care staff will only double or triple the number of deaths, which could be avoided through a comprehensive strategy of locking down nonessential

businesses while supporting workers and their families.

Despite a strong recommendation by the White House Coronavirus Task Force calling for a statewide mask mandate, Oklahoma's Republican Governor Kevin Stitt continues to resist such measures. He was supported by Ascension St. John Medical Center CEO Jeff Nowlin, who said, "Bed capacity is extremely fluid and can change hour to hour," indicating that patients could be transferred to other hospitals in Oklahoma or nearby states. However, health care workers in the state are calling for serious efforts to stem this tide of infections.

Governor Stitt's comment that the situation was sustainable since, "We've instructed the nursing board to clear any red tape to allow nursing students and nurses who are licensed in other states to practice in the state of Oklahoma," is deceptive and provides only sparse cover for the health crisis that is overtaking the state.

The homicidal response to the pandemic is not limited to Republican controlled states. Illinois, overseen by a Democratic governor and state legislature, has not only been concealing reports of outbreaks in workplaces across the state, but is seeing the largest statewide surge in new cases, with more than 15,000 new cases reported on Friday, threatening hospital systems throughout the state. Chicago Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot has only issued a stay-at-home advisory which goes into effect Monday and keeps workplaces open.



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