

“The wolf is at the door”: Missouri hospital heads plead for state action to stem the pandemic

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Missouri hospital leaders have continued to plead with the governor for action in the weeks since an October 29 conference call in which they raised the dangers of runaway infection rates and hospitals being overwhelmed. Since then, Missouri’s Department of Health and Senior Services have reported 65,503 new COVID-19 infections, including 5,843 new cases on Wednesday. Hospitals in the St. Louis area are reporting in the range of 120 to 140 new COVID-19 patients daily.

On November 13, the Missouri Hospital Association (MHA) sent a letter to Republican Governor Mike Parson again raising the desperate need for a statewide mask mandate to limit the spread of the deadly pandemic. Parson, who along with his wife was diagnosed with COVID-19 earlier this year, firmly opposed taking the most basic mitigation steps, like mandating masks, closing bars and restaurants and moving schools to remote learning to stop the spread. This murderous policy has resulted in 97 percent of the state being declared a COVID-19 “red zone.”

In the letter to the governor, MHA President and CEO Herb Kuhn wrote, “the virus is unbowed. It continues its silent and ceaseless replication wherever it finds opportunity. Unfortunately, it is finding ample targets and spreading quickly. By many metrics, conditions are far worse than they were this spring.”

The letter closed with the dire warning: “The wolf is at the door. Missouri’s hospitals urge you to issue a statewide masking mandate. A mask mandate may be unappealing to some, but it has become necessary. We urge your immediate action on this issue.”

Cox Health CEO Steve Edwards tweeted the full text of the letter, adding: “I have great respect for our Governor, I know him to be a caring person. I too appreciate local control. But we are now under uniform threat, like war, it requires a coordinated response. We each give to protect others, we buy time for the vaccine.”

Dr. Alex Garza of the St. Louis Metropolitan Pandemic

Task Force also called on the governor to take decisive action, saying: “COVID-19 is spreading much too quickly and sending far too many people to our hospitals and intensive care units. We are now at a tipping point. The actions that we take today will determine what the next weeks and months will look like.”

The hospitalization crisis has escalated to the point that hospitals in Missouri’s urban centers—St. Louis, Kansas City, Springfield, and Columbia—are turning away rural residents seeking care due to overwhelmed small rural hospitals. Rural hospitals do not have the expertise to treat complex cases and routinely send patients with such conditions to urban hospitals, where there are better facilities and experienced staff. An example of the crisis is that the four St. Louis-area Mercy Hospitals have had to turn down 22 of 104 recent requests to intake patients from rural areas throughout the state. Inadequate staff at local health departments is also preventing proper contact tracing.

A St. Louis University study found St. Louis County’s mask mandate dramatically reduced the spread of the virus compared to neighboring areas. The study showed that three weeks after the mask wearing went into effect, the average daily case increase was 44 percent lower in St. Louis and St. Louis County when compared to neighboring counties, and 12 weeks later, the average daily case growth remained 40 percent lower in St. Louis city and county than in the other suburbs.

School districts in all areas of Missouri are moving some or all of their grades to online-only instruction as COVID-19 cases explode across the state, but it is taking place county by county.

Among many districts and universities to move to online instruction are Sikeston (Scott and New Madrid counties), Marshall (Saline County), Missouri Southern State University in Joplin (Jasper and Newton counties), Wentzville (St. Charles County) and Columbia (Boone County), including Columbia’s flagship university Mizzou.

The students themselves realize that the shuffling around of learning methods is impacting their education. Fourth grader Steven Squires of Columbia Public Schools told KOMU 8, “I feel like I have gotten all caught back up, and now we’re going back on Zoom.” Cayden Bryan, an eighth grader in the same district, remarked, “I feel like most people, including me, are going to be behind.”

To Missouri’s west, Democratic Kansas Governor Laura Kelly announced on Wednesday an executive order that creates a statewide mask mandate after more than a week of record high positivity rates. Kansas City-area Lee’s Summit, where a high school held its last football game at the end of October, is now quarantining more than 700 students. University of Missouri-Kansas City is moving its classes online after next week’s Thanksgiving holiday.

No statewide lockdown is forthcoming in the state. It is up to individual counties and cities to impose mask mandates and capacity restrictions. Schools are among the institutions that are allowed to remain open. Only in the past week have some school districts been forced to return to online instruction after massive increases in cases of their faculty.

As a result the pandemic has begun to claim the lives of teachers and children in Missouri: 34-year-old Potosi School District special education teacher AshLee DeMarinis died September 6 after a three-week illness, and 13-year-old Peyton Baumgarth of Washington Middle School succumbed October 31. The district only stated that additional counselors would be available on campus after Peyton’s death, instead of an immediate return of all students to online instruction.

Teachers are reporting high levels of stress as they are forced to create and teach online and in-person lesson plans with little support. “The stress has kept me at home the last three or four days. I have some issues that are my own, but the stress has blown them completely out of proportion,” Nina Harris, a fourth grade teacher at Lexington Elementary School in St. Louis, told KMOV. In neighboring Illinois, one-third of teachers are considering quitting their profession, according to a poll conducted by the Illinois Education Association (IEA).

Rural areas of Missouri continue to be hit hard by the virus. Pettis County had the highest rate of cases in the entire state for the week of October 31 to November 6. The county had 2,268 confirmed cases as of November 10 out of a total population of 42,500, and Missouri’s Department of Health and Senior Services reported a 36.5 percent positivity rate last week.

Hunger is an increasing concern. The Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri has reported that its partner agencies have seen need increase from three percent to 11 percent in recent months. Seth Wolfmeyer, communications

and marketing manager for The Food Bank, told KOMU, “It’s varied a lot. We have seen an increase in need, especially with a lot of people who are seeking help for food for the first time.” Nationwide, food banks and other nonprofits have had to alter or cancel some of their biggest annual fundraising events as need has shot up.

Instead of facilitating lockdowns, mask mandates and other measures that would save lives, the state’s Republican-led state government is scheming to stop coronavirus victims from suing businesses and schools who force their employees to work on-site during the pandemic.

Missouri House Speaker Elijah Haahr revealed that liability protections for state schools and businesses were being discussed in current legislative sessions. He and other legislative leaders held a conference call with Governor Parson on what a liability immunity bill might look like.

The Missouri Chamber of Commerce CEO Dan Mehan and Chair Al Koller sent a letter to Parson endorsing a liability waiver. They stated that it would “protect businesses from opportunistic claims alleging exposure to COVID-19 on their premises. This temporary, limited immunity from liability should be available if businesses follow government guidance on public health measures.”

It is not only insulting to call victims of COVID-19 exposure “opportunistic” who seek compensation after being exposed to a lethal disease in an unsafe work environment. The state’s insistence on doing nothing to protect the lives and health of workers, students and the residents of the state as a whole, while conniving with business leaders to prevent civil action and protect profits is a damning indictment of the entire capitalist system.

A real fight to stop the deadly coronavirus will not be mounted by either the Democrats or Republicans, who in Missouri as everywhere only serve the interests of big business and the superrich.

Workers must organize independently to enforce a statewide lockdown with full compensation for workers and small business owners that would be part of a nationwide general strike against the homicidal “reopening of the economy.” All who seek to organize workers committees that can fight against the Missouri government’s mandate of death should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



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