

Michigan COVID-19 hospitalizations pushing medical facilities to occupancy limits

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As the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the state of Michigan surged past 325,000 on Thanksgiving, medical facilities across the state were reaching their bed-capacity limits for the treatment of coronavirus patients needing hospitalization.

According to data published by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), statewide bed occupancy reached 75 percent as of November 23 with a total of 4,022 COVID-19 patients in 136 hospitals. The data also showed that 869 coronavirus patients were in hospital intensive care units. With case fatality rate of 2.7 percent, the state reported a total of 9,170 deaths from the pandemic as of Wednesday.

The bed occupancy figures reported by MDHHS are compiled by the Michigan Health & Hospital Association (MHA) and the hospitals are required to enter it into the state's EMResource data system. The percentage of staffed inpatient beds occupied for each hospital includes all patients regardless of their COVID-19 status.

This data revealed that bed occupancy in 53 Michigan hospitals was at 75 percent or greater. It also showed that six hospitals hit 100 percent occupancy and these hospitals—all outside the Detroit metropolitan area—are located in Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Standish, Bay City and St. Joseph, treating a total of 384 COVID-19 patients.

A particularly dire situation is developing in Saginaw with Covenant HealthCare reporting the largest number of COVID-19 patients anywhere in Michigan, with 205 being treated at the facility. The hospital services approximately 20 counties in mid-Michigan and is the largest acute care facility in the region.

Speaking with *MLive*, Covenant HealthCare Communications Manager Kristin Knoll explained the

impact on the community when a hospital reaches the limit of hospital beds, "Like other hospitals across the state, staffing is the biggest challenge when it comes to capacity. Our space can be reconfigured to support different types of patients, but when it comes to staff with specialized skillsets, we have a finite amount."

Knoll said Covenant, "occasionally needs to pause ambulance traffic or transfers from other outlying hospitals. ... Covenant and other regional hospitals have 'paused' from time to time during this period of increased hospitalizations due to the pandemic."

Cities in western Michigan are also in a coronavirus hot spot. Gillian Conrad, communications manager for the Berrien County Health Department, said her county and others along Lake Michigan have seen an "exponential growth" in new cases since early October.

Lakeland Medical Center in St. Joseph, the Berrien County seat of 8,000 people about 25 miles north of the Indiana border, is completely full and treating 70 COVID-19 patients.

Conrad also explained, "We are not seeing any signs of that trend starting to slow down at this point in time. ... We have widespread community transmission, meaning anytime you are gathering with people outside of your household, especially indoors and especially without masks, there's a very high likelihood that someone could have COVID and that virus could be transmitted."

In Muskegon, about 90 miles north of St. Joseph, the Mercy Health Mercy Campus hospital is treating 142 coronavirus patients and is at 97 percent bed occupancy. On November 16, hospital officials put out a call for retired or otherwise inactive nurses to help deal with the COVID-19 cases that are overwhelming both space and staff.

Kim Maguire, Mercy Health Muskegon Chief

Nursing Officer and VP of Patient Care Services, told *MLive*, “We need all hands on deck, honestly,” and explained that the test positivity rate in the county had jumped to 21.8 percent. She also said they were in “desperate straits” with a surge of 940 cases since November 5.

To help deal with the influx of patients, Mercy Health has halted all inpatient surgeries and is seeking the county’s help to reopen as many as three floors at the shuttered Hackley Hospital in Muskegon. This has also included an appeal for help from the National Guard to provide clinicians to staff up the secondary facility.

As other hospital systems have done throughout the pandemic, Mercy Health—which is owned by the not-for-profit Catholic-based health care corporation Trinity Health that owns 93 hospitals in 22 states—closed the Hackley facility less than a month ago based entirely upon financial considerations related to the decline in non-coronavirus health care services.

The eruption of a crisis in hospital bed availability in Michigan follows by ten days the announcement by Democratic Party Governor Gretchen Whitmer of renewed restrictions on business and individual activity amid the surge in COVID-19 cases across the state. Whitmer leveraged the authority of the Public Health Code of the MDHHS to stop dine-in eating at restaurants and bars, shut down high schools and end competitive athletics among other restrictions for a three-week period beginning November 18.

The governor’s measures were a delayed response to the resurgence of the pandemic in Michigan that had become evident by the middle of October. While Republicans in the state legislature—some of whom had connections with the fascist militiamen known as the Wolverine Watchmen involved in a plot to kidnap and murder Governor Whitmer that was exposed in October—have waged a campaign to prevent any restrictions from being imposed, the Democrats have supported forcing workers back into the factories and children into the elementary and middle schools across the state.

The stay-at-home executive orders issued by the governor in March resulted in Michigan becoming a flashpoint for a rightwing campaign orchestrated by the White House claiming that pandemic-related restrictions represented an attack on constitutional rights. Protests were organized in the state capital

Lansing, including a demonstration on May 14 in which armed militiamen entered the Capitol building chanting “Let Us In” and “Our House,” following a tweet by President Donald Trump that demanded, “Liberate Michigan!”

The following Monday, Governor Whitmer supported the auto companies and forced workers back into the factories even though the pandemic was far from under control. The explosion of COVID-19 cases across the state, including a surge within the auto factories that is being concealed by both the corporations and the UAW, combined with the inability of the health care systems to adequately care for those fighting the deadly pandemic is an indictment of the entire capitalist system.



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