

California officials order 5,000 body bags as state's intensive care units near full capacity

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17 December 2020

On Tuesday, California Governor Gavin Newsom announced that state officials had ordered 5,000 additional body bags and 63 refrigerated trailers to store the exploding numbers of dead from COVID-19.

Across California, a public health catastrophe is now unfolding, with coronavirus infections growing exponentially. On Wednesday, the California Department of Public Health reported over 61,000 new daily cases and 407 deaths, by far the highest rates of the pandemic.

The average number of daily cases in California has more than quadrupled over the last month while the number of hospitalizations has more than tripled. With the virus spreading unchecked, hospitalizations will likely double again over the next month, putting unprecedented pressure on entire health care system.

More than 12,000 COVID-19 patients are hospitalized statewide and hospital intensive care units (ICU) are nearing capacity. As of December 16, only about 4.1 percent of the state's ICU beds were currently available.

Even before the pandemic, ICU beds were typically run just above demand to minimize costs with hospitals routinely shuffling patients between ICUs and other hospital wards as needed. With about 2.1 ICU beds per 10,000 inhabitants, California was among the least prepared states in the nation to respond to the dramatic increase in the number of critically ill patients brought on by the pandemic.

Overwhelmed hospitals in Orange County, Imperial County, San Bernardino County and elsewhere have set up field hospitals in tents and trailers. Emergency rooms and paramedic providers have reported that ambulances have had to wait hours to offload their patients, and hospitals are being forced to divert ambulances to other medical facilities.

The situation is especially dire in southern and central California. Available ICU beds have dropped to 0.5 percent in the Southern California Region. Los Angeles County only had 56 ICU beds still available on Tuesday for a population of 10 million.

The 16-county San Joaquin Valley Region in central California has seen its ICU capacity fall to zero percent, meaning that some critically ill patients will have to be treated without adequate equipment, or turned away altogether. Riverside County, population 2.74 million, also had zero ICU beds available as of Wednesday.

In Orange County, average daily infections have grown by a staggering 500 percent over the last month, and on Monday, the county's ICU capacity also fell to zero percent. Last week, Dr. Carl Schultz, director of Emergency Medical Services at Orange County's Health Care Agency, warned that the county's emergency medicine system was in a state of crisis and "may collapse unless emergency directives are implemented now."

Amy Arlund, a critical care nurse at Fresno Medical Center, told the *Sacramento Bee* that her workplace "looks like a war zone... A lot of us have been working full time, double time, overtime. We just cannot keep up this pace, and there is no relief coming our way."

Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*, Antelope Valley Hospital ER nurse Erick Fernandez noted that "The surge is definitely in full force. Sometimes we come in the morning, and a lot of the areas are just full of COVID patients already."

As ICU beds continue to fill, staff to patient ratios have already surpassed critical thresholds. The situation has become so dire that more than 180 hospitals across the state have applied for waivers to bypass state-mandated staff-patient ratios according to the *Times*. A study in *JAMA* found that each additional patient

assigned to a nurse was associated with a 7 percent increase in the likelihood of patient mortality.

The situation is expected to become even more dire than those projections with “all hands on deck” orders issued by hospitals statewide resulting in inordinately longer hours for nurses and staff, along with fewer breaks to deal with spiking COVID-19 cases.

The Democratic Party-controlled state government has responded to the urgent need for medical personnel by reducing the quarantine period for asymptomatic health care workers exposed to the virus from the recommended two weeks to one week. Last Friday, Governor Newsom announced an “expedited waiver process” for hospitals to seek exemptions from the state-mandated limits on the number of patients per nurse.

Throughout the pandemic, nurses have strongly opposed attempts to change the nurse-to patient limits. On Monday, nurses and health care workers protested outside the Los Angeles Medical Center, where Newsom made a publicized visit to watch the first COVID-19 vaccinations of medical workers in the state.

“Waiving the ratios will make things less safe for the patients and the community we serve,” Meredith Piggee, a registered nurse protesting possible waivers at Sutter Roseville Medical Center outside Sacramento, told ABC10. “The hospital had months to plan for this surge and lowering the amount of staff who take care of patients is not the answer.”

The state government and for-profit medical system have proved totally incapable of preparing for the surge of cases. For a state of nearly 40 million people, the Newsom Administration promises to hire 815 temporary medical workers and provide a mere two-day online training program for non-ICU nurses. Layoffs, furloughs, and pay cuts are widespread amidst the worst pandemic in 100 years. An October survey found that approximately half of state physician practices have had to lay off or furlough workers, and that about half of these practices have not seen their staffing levels return to normal.

The regional “Stay at Home Order” issued by Newsom on November 19 has done little to slow the spread of the virus. The order requires regions with ICU capacities under 15 percent to close service businesses, end in-door restaurant dining, and limit retail businesses to 20 percent capacity. However, K-12

schools are exempt from any new closures along with the TV and film industry while large factories, warehouses and other workplaces, which are major vectors of the disease, remain open.

The order of thousands of body bags and dozens of refrigerated trailers is a declaration by the state government that nothing will be done to stop the wave of death. The political establishment, which daily berates the public for spreading the virus, is ready to accept the deaths of thousands—even as a life-saving vaccine is being distributed—before it will do anything to cut across the profits of the banks and major corporations.

Stopping this catastrophe requires a real lockdown, shutting down all non-essential workplaces and closing all schools to in-person learning, until the virus is under control. Ample resources exist to fully compensate workers and small businesses and to provide emergency aid for hospitals. The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees in every industry and take the fight against the pandemic into their own hands.



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