

California hospitals overwhelmed as COVID-19 cases hit 2 million

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California became the first state last week to reach 2 million recorded COVID-19 cases and is now the epicenter of the virus in the US. In Los Angeles County, the state's most populous region, there are an estimated 6,500 people hospitalized, four times the number from last month. The number of people in intensive care units (ICUs) is approaching 1,300, double the number from a month ago.

Every 10 minutes another patient in California dies from the pandemic, according to a *New York Times* database. Nearly every hospital in the state is operating beyond its capacity, putting in makeshift beds and rationing treatment for the most urgent cases. Many nurses and staff are complaining of fatigue and taking much needed leave, while hospitals scramble to make up for the losses in workers.

Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has predicted that hospitalizations could reach up to 100,000 in January under current scenarios. While California was the first state to impose a lockdown in spring, the government's reopening policies have led to a horrific and preventable surge in cases. Last Thursday alone saw 351 new deaths in the state.

Health officials have been begging the public to stay at home during the holiday season, but Governor Newsom has still not issued a statewide order for people to do so. The lack of clear directives from the state, combined with lack of government aid for struggling workers and small businesses, have led to a perfect storm of viral infections and needless death and suffering.

As people travel for the holidays and spread the disease they will be blamed for the rise in infections. Meanwhile, workplaces, schools and other major congregate settings have been allowed to proceed with no systematic effort for contact tracing.

Mendy Hickey, quality director at St. Mary's hospital, told the *New York Times*, "In the beginning, especially, you saw all these pictures and videos from New York and you think, 'Oh my God, it can never get that bad here,'" adding, "And while we have all the supplies we need, it is that bad here, and we have no staff to take care of patients." Ms. Hickey told the *Times* she sometimes works 23 hours a day and, while she was able to spend Christmas morning with her three daughters, she had to return later that day to the hospital.

Since the start of the pandemic, California has seen more than 2.1 million positive cases and more than 24,220 people die from COVID-19, according to the California Department of Public Health.

In the past two weeks alone, there have been an additional 570,000 cases and 3,250 deaths, averaging to record highs of 41,000 new cases and 231 deaths every day. Last week, California reported the highest number of new cases per capita in the past week of any state, according to Johns Hopkins University.

This week will see more than 19,750 patients hospitalized for the virus in California, including 4,228 in ICUs. Both totals are now double the peak recorded during the summer when there were around 7,200 hospitalized with 2,050 in intensive care.

According to state officials, the statewide aggregate of ICU availability has been at zero percent since Christmas Eve. While not every region is operating at no capacity, two regions with zero ICU beds, Southern California and San Joaquin Valley, are now operating under emergency protocols in order to continue treating severe patients, whether or not they have COVID-19.

Only these two regions have been placed under the governor's stay-at-home order from three weeks ago. The order restricts indoor and outdoor dining at

restaurants and closes businesses like salons and barbershops, on top of restrictions already in place for so-called purple tier counties.

The makeshift and arbitrary character of the governor's color-coded scheme is useless in stopping a virus that does not respect county lines. As mentioned before, countless nonessential businesses and public venues remain open, ensuring that the pandemic will spread unabated.

At a Monday news conference, Newsom said that state Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly will soon provide ICU projections that will guide the timeline by which each region ends its stay-at-home orders. Extensions in Southern California and San Joaquin Valley are guaranteed.

Hospitals throughout the state are so overwhelmed it was revealed over the weekend that Kaiser Permanente would postpone "elective and non-urgent surgeries" at its Northern California hospitals for one week, from now until January 4, according to the *San Jose Mercury News*.

Health officials are worried of the potential impact that holiday gatherings for Christmas and New Year's will have to deepen the crisis. A surge was reported in early November and grew worse after Thanksgiving, and now officials fear the Christmas holiday will exponentially increase the number of infections, hospitalizations and deaths in the coming weeks.

Newsom declared in a recent video message that the state projects its numbers will double next month to more than 36,000 hospitalized patients.

Meanwhile, vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna began arriving this week at California skilled nursing facilities. These facilities are in "Phase 1a" of the state's massive inoculation campaign. The other group in Phase 1a consists of front-line health care workers who deal directly with COVID-19 patients, who already began receiving shots in mid-December.

It is estimated that it will take a month to inoculate all of the state's 1,200 licensed nursing facilities, which house some of the most vulnerable populations and have been hotspots for the pandemic.



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