

Hospitals overwhelmed and bodies loaded into semi-trailers as California reaches breaking point with COVID-19

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The state of California has become the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

On New Year's Eve, 585 COVID-19 deaths were reported in the state, making up more than one seventh of all deaths from the virus reported in the United States that day. More than 2.4 million people, in a state of 39 million, have been infected, with nearly 39,000 more diagnosed Sunday.

In Los Angeles, San Diego, and the entirety of Southern and Central Valley California, hospital intensive care units have entirely run out of space. On January 1, there were over 20,000 people hospitalized throughout the state; by comparison, at the height of the spike on July 8 only 8,000 were hospitalized.

The flood of coronavirus cases has exposed the underfunded, unprepared health care system in the richest state in the country. The *Los Angeles Times* reports "hospitals are scrambling to find staff" and that there is a "chronic shortage of oxygen tanks." The paper quoted Christina Ghaly, the Los Angeles County director of health services, who described non-COVID outpatient services as down to a "skeleton crew." She said the county was on the "brink of catastrophe."

Ambulances in Los Angeles County are waiting up to eight hours to offload their patients at hospitals, according to Cathy Chidester, director of Los Angeles County's Emergency Medical Services. In some instances, ambulances are being redirected, or potential patients simply sent home.

A nurse in Southern California sent the *World Socialist Web Site* a photo of a refrigerated semi-truck that had just arrived at the hospital they work east of Los Angeles. Hospitals and mortuaries across the state are placing rental orders for similar units to handle the

mounting casualties as they overwhelm the healthcare system.

Continental Funeral Home in Los Angeles told ABC 7 News that every funeral home they know are past their capacity to handle bodies. The owner reports that it is removing bodies at six times its normal rate.

The Southern California nurse spoke to the WSWs about how the lack of staffing is a critical issue in the unfolding catastrophe.

"We are stretched so thin, the more patients we take care of the less we can *safely* take care of," she said. "I hate to say it but when you're exhausted maybe you miss things, maybe doctors will miss things."

"The other morning," she continued, "I had three deaths by 9 a.m. and my shift started at 6 a.m.... Recently we had a 25-year-old who died and his only comorbidity was obesity. He was crying and scared to be intubated. He was a little boy. His heart gave out and he died. Another nurse was there holding his hand because his mom wasn't there."

"When you are in the moment you do everything you can, you are numb to things, but after I heard [another patient] was doing better I sat in the car and cried for an hour. It doesn't mean she is out of the woods yet but after so much death, we take these victories."

There is a large outbreak of the virus among the tens of thousands of homeless people living in Los Angeles. In the fall, recorded cases among the homeless were at 60 a week in the city. It has since risen in the last week to almost 550 a week. Rev. Andrew Bales, director of Union Rescue Mission, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "all of skid row and many agencies/missions are hot spots. All are overwhelmed."

Because of the lag between infection and symptoms,

Christmas and New Year's activities and shopping are only beginning to result in hospitalizations. Because of these, epidemiologists predict January may easily be a more deadly month than December.

Dr. Brad Spellberg, chief medical officer at the Los Angeles County-University of Southern California Medical Center, warned CNN of a "total collapse of the health care system" if case numbers continue to rise.

Because of the inadequacy of medical services, including insufficient medical workers, emergency medical workers have deployed to various parts of the state. The Army Corps of Engineers has now been deployed to Los Angeles County to supplement the inadequate oxygen supplies of the area. In the Central Valley region, a poorer area dominated by agriculture, 1,200 emergency medical workers were sent last week to treat patients as hospitalization from the pandemic more than doubled in several counties last month.

In statements made over the weekend, Los Angeles' Democratic Mayor Eric Garcetti sought to blame the pandemic on the population, remarking, "It's so critical we change our behavior. Everybody's doing something but everybody can do more." The hypocrisy of this statement is staggering. In Los Angeles, major malls are open, with thousands of people inside. Factories are open. The film industry is open.

Garcetti and other California Democrats have sought to place the blame of the pandemic on workers and small business owners, while insisting that the major operations of money making remain open throughout the state. Lockdown measures that do nothing to halt the major public spreads of the virus, while leaving workers and small business owners penniless, are hypocritical and fully inadequate to stop the virus.

Last Wednesday, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom even announced plans for the reopening of California's schools, which includes a significant, \$450 per student financial incentive to school districts that achieve reopening. A financial incentive like this could pressure officials to fudge infection numbers as they have in Florida.



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