

Hospitals throughout US South remain inundated with COVID-19 patients as Delta variant surge continues

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The Southern region of the United States is continuing to see an explosive growth of hospitalizations and deaths which is being fueled by the highly infectious Delta variant of COVID-19. The latest wave of virus is taking a dangerous toll on hospitals in multiple states, as the enormous influx of sick patients is causing strains on hospital staffing and placing untold pressure on health care workers.

While states such as Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Georgia have seen slight declines in their hospitalizations since the initial onset of the Delta wave in August and early September, deaths in all four states have shot upward in recent weeks, demonstrating that fatalities are catching up with the monstrous rise in infections which has been driven by the bipartisan push to reopen schools and lift all pandemic restrictions combined with low vaccination rates.

In Georgia, daily deaths from COVID-19 have risen nearly ten-fold since August 1, according to data from the Georgia Department of Health. An average of 93.7 Georgians a day are currently dying of the virus, which represents a 977 percent increase since the beginning of August.

The disaster facing the South has been one of the main contributors to the catastrophic resurgence of the pandemic in the US since early July. The country is now averaging over 2,000 COVID-19 deaths and about 150,000 new infections every day, the highest levels since the deadly winter surge.

Despite the Biden administration's recent announcement of a vaccine or testing requirement for business with more than 100 employees, about 770,000 shots per day of the vaccine are being dispensed nationwide, well below the peak of 3.4 million a day in mid-April. The slow rate of vaccinations has also rendered a large chunk of the population vulnerable to the Delta variant, with 46 percent still unvaccinated—including all children under the age of 12.

In Tennessee, intensive care units remain dangerously full and have begun to create disruptions in hospital systems across the state. Hospitalizations have plateaued at well over

3,000 since the beginning of September. West Tennessee Healthcare, a critical access hospital in Bolivar, east of Memphis, currently has at least a dozen patients admitted into its facility, five times the two or three patients that the facility usually sees. Half of them are sick with COVID-19, according to Hospital CEO Ruby Kirby.

Conditions have worsened to the point where the hospital's health operators are being forced to transfer ventilated patients to intensive care units (ICUs) in larger cities like Memphis or Nashville, which also have a very limited number of open beds. "We're managing them, but it is putting a strain on the system, trying to hold these patients in these hospitals until we can get them moved," Kirby told WKU Public Radio. While COVID-19 hospitalizations statewide have declined slightly over the last week, more than a thousand COVID patients remain in ICUs across Tennessee.

Like many states that have become epicenters for the latest Delta wave, staffing has reached dangerously low levels at hospitals which are flooded with COVID-19 patients. Many hospitals in Tennessee are now receiving help from the state's National Guard, while the state has even offered money to help pay for travel nurses.

In eastern Tennessee, hospital operators say even offering high pay isn't enough to fill all the openings left by nurses who've left the COVID-flooded ICUs due to working arduously long hours and suffering burnout. One chief medical officer, Dr. Harold Naremore of Blount Memorial Hospital in Maryville, told WKU the challenges the hospital is facing are "very frightening" because "there's no more staff to bring in."

At North Carolina's Duke University Hospital in Durham, 99 percent of adult inpatient beds were occupied on average each day in the week ending on September 11—the ninth-straight week that the hospital has been at 98-100 percent capacity. According to the data, an average of 81 of those patients had confirmed or suspected COVID-19, meaning

COVID patients filled about one out of every nine beds on average each day. In the intensive care unit, all ICU beds were occupied on average each day last week.

At the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Hospital, 86 percent of adult beds were occupied on average each day that same week, and 83 of those beds were filled with COVID-19 patients. About one in seven beds were filled with a COVID patient each day. At WakeMed in Raleigh, 88 percent of inpatient beds were occupied on average each day. Of those beds, more than a quarter were filled with COVID-19 patients—a daily average of nearly 150 suspected and confirmed COVID patients.

In Kentucky, at least 70 percent of hospitals are facing critical staffing shortages, with health and political officials issuing dire warnings of an imminent collapse of several facilities. Staffing shortages have been reported in 66 of the state's 96 hospitals, the highest level yet throughout the pandemic. Governor Andy Beshear along with Kentucky's public health commissioner Dr. Steven Stack admitted last week that the latest surge in COVID-19 is straining the entire health care system.

"Our hospitals are at the brink of collapse in many communities," Stack noted. According to health experts, the highly contagious Delta variant has exacerbated the crisis. Dr. Ryan Stanton, an emergency room physician in Lexington, Kentucky said he's seen the virus spread to whole families, especially if older members are unvaccinated. "Now in Kentucky, one-third of new cases are under age 18," Stanton said in a recent *Newsweek* interview.

Contrary to the lying claims made by the Biden White House and entire political establishment that the reopening of K-12 schools can be done safely, one of the main facilitators for transmission are now children, with small children and youth participating in in-person learning and other face-to-face activities spreading the virus to the rest of their families. Stanton pointed to the reopening of schools and classroom learning, a reckless and homicidal policy that's been pursued by every governor nationwide and the Biden administration, as directly responsible for the catastrophe. "Between daycare and schools and school activities, and friends getting together, there are just so many exposures."

Perhaps the greatest indicator of distress from the Delta-fueled upsurge are intolerable conditions that health care workers in Kentucky and nationwide have been forced to endure. More than 400 members of the Kentucky National Guard, as well as strike teams from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's emergency medical services, have now been deployed to help struggling hospitals across the state.

In an interview with ABC News, Kerri Eklund, a nurse

working in Elizabethtown at Baptist Health Hardin Hospital, relayed the tragic burdens facing nurses. "I would honestly say it's at least three times worse than what it was the first time. We're seeing a lot of people getting really sick. There are patients that will come in and they'll be doing okay for a few days and then, in the blink of an eye, they go downhill."

Many health care workers have described the current wave as unexpected after brief relief in the spring and early summer, with infections and deaths slowed to their lowest numbers during the pandemic. Central blame for the resurgence, however, lies with both corporate-controlled parties and institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which in May dropped all national health mandates, above all social distancing and masking, in order to greenlight in-person learning in schools, as demanded by Biden, and ensure no restrictions remained on profit making.

With the pandemic escalating at break-neck speed, frontline health care workers are seeing the consequences of the deadly policies pursued by the ruling class in intolerable working conditions. Medical professionals from nurses and physician assistants to respiratory therapists have reported feeling stretched so thin that many are experiencing exhaustion and burnout.

In Kentucky, which has become an epicenter for the new surge, health practitioners have reported seeing highly experienced and exceptional colleagues walk away from their profession in droves because of the stress and anxiety they are having to deal with. Many front-line workers are fearful of yet another surge as the current fall season stretches into the winter months without any serious effort to suppress the pandemic and eliminate COVID-19. In the same interview with *Newsweek*, Eklund said, "I'm really worried that it's just going to keep getting worse...because we all know that winter is the worst time for health issues all together."



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