

New Mexico hospitals enact crisis standards of care amidst jump of COVID-19 cases

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Albuquerque, New Mexico's Presbyterian Health Services and University of New Mexico (UNM) Health announced on November 11 that they were activating "crisis standards of care" (CSC). In addition to their main hospitals, the announcement affects other Presbyterian and UNM facilities in the Albuquerque metro area.

Another large hospital system in Albuquerque, Lovelace Health System, released a statement saying, "We will continue to collaborate with the state and the hospitals across New Mexico to fight this pandemic and care for our patients, especially those most vulnerable. At this time, we have not implemented crisis standards of care. 88% of patients hospitalized in our facilities are receiving care for non-COVID related conditions."

As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* on November 1 in relation to the crisis in neighboring Colorado, CSC can "involve redirecting less experienced nurses to help in intensive care units, activating the National Guard to take over clerical and nonmedical tasks, and even mobilizing volunteers and family members to assist patients with hygiene in a last-gasp effort to free up medical personnel for more intensive tasks."

Another possible aspect of the standards is the imposition of rationing of medical care by utilizing a triage, based on a points system, that would relegate patients to standard medical beds even though they might be in dire need of intensive care unit treatment.

Despite the state's relatively high, and highly touted, rate of vaccinations (63 percent) as well as its continuing—though poorly enforced—indoor mask mandate, Delta-driven COVID-19 cases have been surging in New Mexico faster than in any other state. Since the last week in October, there has been a 48

percent increase in new daily cases, with the seven-day average case count reaching 1,334 on November 13, with 512 hospitalizations and an average of 8 deaths per day.

Since the pandemic began, there have been more than 292,000 confirmed COVID-19 infections in the state and at least 5,171 have died from the disease. Cases have been rising since they hit a recent low of 40 per day in early July.

Two aspects of the recent spike are especially notable. First, the percentage of breakthrough cases, i.e., infections of the fully vaccinated, represented 28 percent of new cases and 23 percent of hospitalizations. This statistic points to the waning of the effectiveness of vaccines after several months.

Second, the number of infected children is on the rise. The average daily case rate for 5- to 11-year-olds reached 60 per 100,000 so far this month, with Santa Fe Public Schools, to cite one example, counting 40 new cases between November 8 and 10, the greatest number in such a short timeframe for the academic year.

These figures belie two claims constantly made by bourgeois politicians and the media: that vaccines alone are the most effective means of combatting the virus, and that children are less susceptible to infection. These assertions have been used by both parties of the ruling class and the Democrats' allies in the trade unions to push for the reopening of workplaces and schools.

Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham reactivated CSC guidelines on October 18 as COVID-19 cases were exploding. San Juan County, in the northwest Four Corners region, which shares its border with Arizona, Utah and Colorado and contains Navajo, Hopi, Ute and Zuni nations and reserves, was the first to put them into practice on November 4. San Juan Regional Medical Center, in Farmington, treated

289 patients with coronavirus in October, and 17 died. On November 10, San Juan County reported 188 new cases.

Two other counties have reported a surge in new cases: southern Doña Ana County, which borders Mexico and Texas's Big Bend Country, with 212 cases, and Bernalillo County in the state's center, home to the state's largest city, Albuquerque, with 385.

Doña Ana County's Mountainview Regional Medical Center in Las Cruces, New Mexico's second largest city, has not announced if it will enact a CSC.

A statement from Lujan Grisham said that the announcements "underscores the critical situation facing New Mexicans needing hospital care and health care workers across the state" and urged that "every eligible New Mexican get vaccinated—including children aged 5-17—and that all eligible vaccinated New Mexicans get their boosters. All of us must continue to use the other tools we have available, including wearing masks indoors and frequently washing hands." It concluded that "we will continue to be a model for others states in distributing vaccines and boosters and other protective measures, particularly as we look toward entering the winter months."

Other state officials painted a less optimistic picture. State Epidemiologist Christine Ross lamented, "We're swimming in a sea of red," referring to the color code for a dangerous rate of spread. With colder weather coming, in an environment of ICU bed shortages, overwork and mass resignations of nurses and other caregivers and auxiliary personnel, as well as shortages of teachers, bus drivers and other staff in school systems, the possibility, or rather probability, of a health disaster is very high under the current state of affairs.

Acting Health Secretary Dr. David Scrase said at a recent online news conference, "Some grim news today—things continue to get worse," and noted that, with the CSC in effect, "If you have a heart attack today, there might not be a bed for you."

Dr. Scrase, though he said that a return to business restrictions was not completely out of consideration, only said that health officials should be "open to considering all possible measures, depending on how bad the outbreak becomes," the *Santa Fe New Mexican* reported. At the same time, he placed great emphasis on masks and vaccinations, echoing the governor's

constant refrain.

The "mitigation" strategy of Democratic governors like Lujan Grisham, Colorado's Jared Polis and California's Gavin Newsom, like the "herd immunity" campaigns of Republicans like Texas's Greg Abbott and Florida's Ron DeSantis prioritizes keeping the "economy," that is, profitmaking, going to the detriment of working people and their families who are told that there is no alternative, and they must live with, and die with, the pandemic.

There is an alternative: an elimination strategy which shuts down schools and non-essential workplaces with full compensation for those affected in order to halt the spread of COVID-19. This must be combined with a mass vaccination program in coordination with mass testing, quarantining and contact tracing to stamp out the deadly virus.

Above all, this requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees run by working people and outside of the Republican and Democratic parties and the trade unions, which are guided by the science and fighting to meet the needs of the population with no regard for private profit.



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