

As COVID-19 cases surge throughout Ohio, Republican-controlled state senate holds a hearing on antivaccine bill

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On November 26, 2021, the day after Thanksgiving, Ohio reported 9,143 new COVID-19 cases. This was the highest single-day peak since last year's winter surge. What makes the figure a startling statistic is that almost every state across the US reported that cases dramatically plummeted on the eve of the holiday weekend, prompting the *New York Times* daily COVID-19 tracker to annotate directly on their graph that "many states did not report data on Thanksgiving."

In fact, after a high of close to 159,000 cases on November 22, just before Thanksgiving, by November 27, the figure for infections nationwide was down to 26,433. The seven-day moving average had dropped 10,000 to 85,432 daily COVID-19 infections. These sudden wide swings in critical statistics are just one more indication of state and federal officials' contempt for public health and providing the population with a clear picture of where the crisis stands.

The only statistic that continued its ascent was hospitalizations, which reached 52,416 across the country on the same day, an 11 percent increase over a 14-day change. The accuracy of this data has everything to do with where this information is obtained. Hospitals and health care systems do not have the luxury of taking a holiday with patients pouring into their emergency departments, which brings us back to the figures reported in Ohio.

According to the Ohio Hospital Association, COVID-19 admissions to the hospitals are continuing to climb after declining somewhat through the month of October. Over the last three weeks, hospitalizations have been up 57 percent, with a 45 percent rise in patients with COVID-19 infections needing intensive care treatment. The state's health department reported

the following figures: 3,735 coronavirus patients hospitalized, 975 in the ICUs, and 623 on ventilators across the state.

Since the September surge in cases, health care systems in Ohio have been facing a persistent barrage of patients that have taxed doctors, nurses and staff. In Northeast Ohio, Dr. Heidi Gullett, medical director for Cuyahoga County Board of Health, said of the current surge, "There is real fatigue with wearing masks, and there is a fatigue with additional vaccinations for people who haven't yet gotten their first dose."

Dr. Robert Wyllie, chief of medical operations at the Cleveland Clinic and head of northern Ohio's COVID-19 response, told Ideastream Public Media that they could not "pinpoint" why cases and hospital admissions were climbing again after the slow down in October. He attributed some of these difficulties to staffing shortages across the country. "The hospitals have beds, but where we're having a challenge not only in Ohio but the United States is the number of staff." He added, "We still have patients coming in with heart attacks and strokes and all the other problems that need medical attention that have to be addressed."

Besides hospital numbers, another accurate metric for community spread is the test positivity rates. Though less testing is being conducted, more tests are turning up positive, indicating a far wider spread of infection not being captured by simply reporting positive cases. David Christopher, a clinical laboratory scientist in Ohio, tweeted yesterday that the positivity rate for COVID-19 in the Northeast Ohio hospital systems clinical labs has spiked to 26 percent. He also commented there has been "an uptick" of patients being admitted who had previously received their

COVID-19 vaccines.

Despite these disastrous trends and the continued surge of infections that include the threat posed by the new Omicron variant that has gripped international headlines, the Ohio Senate General Government Budget Committee is expected to hold hearings this week on House Bill 218, reactionary antivaccine legislation which was approved by the House on November 18, 2021.

The bill, sponsored by Republican Ohio House of Representatives member Al Cutrona, provides broad exemptions from vaccine requirements. Under its provisions, all businesses, school districts and municipalities must allow all individuals entry regardless of their vaccine status. Additionally, it provides exemptions for vaccination based on medical contraindication, previous infection and reasons of personal conscience that include religious convictions.

On Monday, Judge Matthew Schelp of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, a Trump appointee, issued an injunction blocking President Joe Biden's coronavirus vaccine mandate for health care workers across 10 states: Alaska, Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, New Hampshire, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming. This is yet another setback to the Biden administration's attempt to implement COVID-19 vaccine requirements.

The lawsuit was filed on November 10, 2021, stating that the rule issued by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) "threatens with job loss millions of health care workers who risk[ed] their lives in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to care for strangers and friends in their communities."

Judge Schelp indicated in his ruling that the lawsuit was likely to succeed on the issue that Congress had never given CMS the authority to mandate vaccines: "CMS seeks to overtake an area of traditional state authority by imposing an unprecedented demand to federally dictate the private medical decisions of millions of Americans. Such action challenges traditional notions of federalism."

Republican Ohio House Speaker Bob Cupp, who worked diligently to get the bill through the House, was hopeful that the federal courts would strike down the president's mandates for health care workers and employers of large companies. "Federal requirements will supersede any state requirements," he said, "but

the federal mandate on private employers has been put on hold by the federal courts. And there are lawsuits pending against the federal mandates for hospitals, nursing homes, all kinds of things. So, we'll see what the federal courts do in that if they're put on hold and if this bill should pass and come into law, this bill would control that."

Meanwhile, as the Ohio state government, in the face of a growing surge of infections, systematically undermines every opportunity to bring the pandemic under control, Biden admitted that "sooner or later, we're going to see (Omicron) cases." But he quickly added, "This variant is a cause for concern—not a cause for panic." He then called for everyone to get vaccinated or get their booster shots as soon as possible.

The policies of both the Republicans and Democrats, first under Trump and now under Biden, have pushed the COVID-19 death toll over 800,000, ruling out the closure of schools and nonessential businesses combined with a robust testing, tracing, quarantine and vaccination program to stop the spread of the virus. And it has been the same affirmed policies that have repeatedly allowed the evolution of more virulent strains of the coronavirus.

Capitalism has assured that Omicron will not be the last variant. The working class must act, once and for all, to end the pandemic and capitalist rule.



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