Outgoing NIH director warns that Omicron variant means “a million cases a day” by February

Bryan Dyne
19 December 2021

The newly retired director of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins, warned in an interview with NPR on Sunday of the potential for “a million coronavirus cases a day” in the United States as the Omicron variant continues to spread across the country.

“We cannot afford to let down our guard,” Collins told NPR. “[T]he virus is not tired of us. It’s having a great old time changing its shape every couple of months, coming up with new variants and figuring out ways to be even more contagious.” He continued, commenting on Omicron’s 57 different mutations, that the emergence of the new variant is “almost like we’re starting over with a different virus than where we began.”

Three days before, a study was published by researchers from the University of Texas COVID-19 Modeling Consortium which echoed Collins’ warning. The report found that, assuming a sharp increase in cases similar to what has been happening in South Africa and the United Kingdom, there could soon be as many as 600,000 cases a day in the US.

Both Collins’ estimate and the modeling from the University of Texas are staggering figures. They are suggesting a winter surge about three times as large, in terms of daily cases, as last year. The UT research also estimates peak hospitalizations capping out at just under 40,000 a day, and deaths exceeding 4,500 every day. Both figures are well above the rates of hospitalizations and deaths from last January, the worst month of the pandemic up to now.

Such an oncoming storm of the Omicron variant in the United States has already begun. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that, as of December 11, 3 percent of cases in the United States were caused by the Omicron variant. The data implies that, as of a week ago, at least 3,500 of the 118,000 coronavirus cases in the US were caused by the Omicron variant, up from 580 out of 116,000 the previous week. This is a six-fold increase in only a week.

In that time, the Omicron variant has spread to 45 states, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico, and will likely be detected in the remaining states in the coming week. And as the data from the CDC makes clear, the spread of the variant in the US is mirroring that observed in South Africa, the United Kingdom and other countries. The number of new cases caused by Omicron is doubling every 1.5-3 days.

Moreover, the emergence of the new variant has not significantly slowed the spread of the old. The vast majority of the 122,000 daily cases and all of the nearly 1,200 deaths in the US have been caused by the Delta variant, which continues to rampage across the Northeast and Midwest as winter sets in.

In New York, which is being hit with a dual wave of Delta and Omicron, daily cases have jumped 50 percent from an average of 10,000 a week ago to 15,000 today, just under last winter’s record. In Ohio, daily cases have reached more than 8,700. In New Jersey, daily case counts have shot up to 5,300. Other states, including Maine, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Michigan, are experiencing daily case counts at or exceeding their previous records.

To date, there have been more than 51 million confirmed cases of the pandemic in the US and more than 827,000 deaths. Worldwide, there have been 275 million cases, and just under 5.37 million dead,

© World Socialist Web Site

according to official figures.

Despite the sharp surge, President Joe Biden has continued to downplay the dangers posed by the Omicron variant, focusing solely on the need for vaccinations. He claimed at a press briefing on Thursday, “For the unvaccinated, we are looking at a winter of severe illness and death... for themselves, their families and the hospitals they’ll soon overwhelm. But there’s good news: If you’re vaccinated and you have your booster shot, you’re protected from severe illness and death.”

In reality, data from South Africa show that Omicron is capable of infecting those who have received one dose of traditional vaccines and two doses of mRNA vaccines. Omicron has also demonstrated the ability to reinfect those who have already been infected by a previous variant. And after more than a month of spreading in South Africa’s Gauteng province, there are about twice as many hospitalizations from Omicron, similar numbers of patients in intensive care and on ventilators, and 25 percent more deaths. So much for Omicron being “mild.”

Biden is currently slated to give a more comprehensive speech regarding the spread of the Omicron variant on Tuesday. It is however doubtful that the speech will call for more than more mask use, a further push for vaccinations, and perhaps a limited call for an increase in testing and contact tracing.

The closure of schools and nonessential businesses, on the other hand, is more and more explicitly being ruled out. The governors of Maryland, Colorado and New Jersey have rejected any emergency lockdown measures to control the spread of the disease. Larry Hogan of Maryland told Fox News Sunday that “We are not anticipating any lockdowns at all… We are not considering them.” And both New York Governor Kathy Hochul and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio have rejected any plans for further lockdowns.

“No, no, no,” said de Blasio to the WYNC radio station, when asked if he was considering closing schools or businesses.

Such measures are, however, absolutely necessary to stop the oncoming tsunami of Omicron infections. The UT COVID-19 paper made clear that its projections hold only if “**the US does not enact policies… to slow transmission**” (emphasis in original).

What workers and young people should take from such warnings is that policies to slow transmission must be enacted. These include mass testing, contact tracing, isolation, mask wearing, vaccinations and, above all, the closure of schools and nonessential workplaces with full financial compensation for workers. There were more than 100,000 deaths last January; there must not be a second winter of death.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site