

US West Coast hospitals overwhelmed by Omicron with thousands of doctors and nurses infected

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Hospitals from California to Washington state are in the worst crisis of the pandemic as a massive spike in cases of the now dominant and highly transmissible Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 rips through the population, shattering records and infecting even fully vaccinated frontline health care workers.

In the United States, this week's seven-day average of new daily cases has surpassed half a million, a record high, with nearly 120,000 people hospitalized with COVID-19, near an all-time high. The Omicron variant now makes up around 95 percent of all new COVID-19 cases in the United States according to a Tuesday update by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

In Oregon, the average of new daily cases has reached 3,331 per day with 580 out of 768 adult ICU beds filled. The Oregon State Hospital in Salem is pausing new patient admissions due to a COVID-19 outbreak with 29 patients and 32 employees in the facility testing positive. Hospital Superintendent Dolly Matteucci announced in a letter on Tuesday that "We expect that number to rise, given the high-risk exposures involved."

Over the last week, Washington state has averaged 8,123 new confirmed cases per day with 77 percent of ICU beds filled, 915 out of 1,189.

Dr. John Lynch, the medical director of Harborview Medical Center's infection control program, said that hospitalizations are pushing Washington's health care system "closer than they've ever been [to] a crisis point." Washington is facing hospitalization rates higher than at any other point in the pandemic.

Despite the constant lies pushed by the ruling class and their mouthpieces in corporate media that children

are not severely impacted by COVID, more than 325,000 children in the US tested positive for COVID-19 last week.

Under these conditions Seattle Children's Hospital has seen a record number of patients. Shaquita Bell, a pediatrician at Seattle Children, told NPR that "ERs are at 200 percent. Like, our ER here in Seattle, at Seattle Children's, is operating at all-time high records of patients seeking care. We've had record rates of respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV infections. Children are being admitted with both COVID and RSV infections."

Dr. John McGuire, the hospital's chief of the Division of Pediatric Critical Care Medicine, explained to KIRO 7, "I expect if this wave continues to rise in the next several weeks, we probably will see more kids require hospitalization. It's interesting we're seeing Omicron coming into our region during a time when kids are not in school. So we'll see what happens in a week or two."

In Hawaii, there is currently a wave of infections far surpassing anything previously recorded on the islands with an average of 2,780 new confirmed cases per day, well above the September 2020 peak of 910 daily new cases. As of this writing, 121 out of 200 ICU beds in the state are filled and hospitalizations are projected to rise. Health officials confirm that at least 1,000 frontline clinical workers across the state are out sick after testing positive for the virus.

In California, newly reported cases shot up from 46,362 on January 3 to an astounding 141,792 on January 4. There has been a growth of 500 percent over a 14-day period according to the *New York Times* COVID-19 tracker. The seven-day average for the state

has reached 57,019, surpassing the previous record of 44,770 cases per day set during the deadly winter surge of 2020.

Cases and hospitalizations are among the highest in Southern California, with San Diego, Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Orange counties reporting daily average rates of more than 133 cases per 100,000 residents and a hospitalization rate of 21 for every 100,000 residents. California's state COVID-19 dashboard is reporting a test positivity rate of 21.3 percent, up from last year's high of 17 percent.

All over the region people are lining up for hours at testing sites where lines stretch multiple city blocks. With pharmacies selling out of rapid test kits many hospitals are reporting that their emergency rooms are being overwhelmed by patients with symptoms who are seeking testing and treatment.

Hospitals are also overwhelmed by the rise in cases among staff. A worker at UC San Diego (UCSD) Medical Center told the WSWS, "today we were told at a town hall meeting that many operations had to be canceled at the hospital because we are seeing a major staffing shortage due to hundreds of doctors and nurses catching COVID after the holiday season. We were also told that, even though they were vaccinated, some of these workers are out sick from COVID for a second time."

Data presented at the UCSD Medical Center town hall shows a huge surge in new infections among health care workers with 593 employees out of work after testing positive. Ninety percent of these workers were symptomatic and 10 percent were testing positive for a second time. Of the workers testing positive, 32.6 percent were nurses, 24.3 percent physicians and 24.3 percent were front desk and administrative workers.

Despite the clear danger Omicron is posing to workers and patients, preventing infection is not prioritized at the hospital. One speaker at the town hall explained that, "quarantine guidelines are being changed to match the new CDC guidelines in order to accommodate the staffing shortages."

Workers are outraged that new CDC guidelines reducing isolation time for those who are infected from 10 days to five days are being pursued all across the medical system.

A nurse in Los Angeles told the WSWS, "Five day quarantine is BS, if people would just come outright to

say let's get everyone infected for herd immunity then sure why even bother to quarantine ... I can't come to work out of being conscientious. I'd get my coworkers sick ... Five days for me to recover from a simple cold and cough is ok, not COVID. Positive is positive, asymptomatic or not. You carry the virus, you can transmit, isn't that simple?"

As a result of the current surge, hospital morgues are filling up and one eyewitness told CBS Los Angeles that upwards of 20 decomposing bodies of COVID-19 patients were left outside in the rain at Gardena Community Hospital in Los Angeles while hospital workers rearranged the almost full portable overflow freezer. Hospital workers were seen lifting the bodies into mobile freezers as fluids leaked from body bags. Several of the health care workers were tearful as they left the scene.

Vidal Herrera, an owner of an independent autopsy company who saw pictures of the Gardena incident, told CBS LA, "I could see a lot of bodily fluids, and right there the pathogens—that can expose security guards and whomever walks in there. A body should never be there for more than two weeks."

"Incidents like this are not uncommon," Herrera noted grimly, adding, "It's going to get worse with COVID surges. It's far from over."

The fight against the pandemic is a fight against capitalism. We urge health care workers to contact the WSWS, engage in the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic and form rank-and-file committees in your workplace and link your struggle with workers around the world to fight for the eradication of the pandemic.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact