

Missouri hospitals and schools reel from staffing shortages

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As the Omicron variant surges in the US, COVID-19 hospitalizations in Missouri are reaching new records. The illnesses and deaths are throwing hospitals, schools, government offices, grocery stores and other workplaces into disarray.

The St. Louis area has very high COVID-19 positivity rates, reaching nearly 40 percent in St. Louis City, St. Louis County and St. Charles County. By comparison, the winter 2021 positivity rate was only 20 percent. In the St. Louis metropolitan area, an average of 208 people a day were admitted to a hospital for COVID last week.

As of January 11, there were over 3,100 COVID patients in the state's hospitals. Since the pandemic began, there have been nearly 1.2 million cases and 16,822 deaths in the state. Sixty-three percent of the population has gotten at least one vaccine dose. While there is currently a mask order in place in St. Louis County, it is unenforceable due to a lawsuit filed by Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt.

Dr. Alex Garza, co-director of the St. Louis Pandemic Task Force, which involves four of the area's largest health care centers, warns, "Although it's hard to comprehend, we believe it's probably going to get worse over the next couple of weeks." The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that some patients visiting area emergency rooms must be boarded for days at a time, due to medical staff being busy treating COVID-19 patients. Dr. Aamina Akhtar, chief medical officer for Mercy Hospital South, told the *Post-Dispatch*, "Some of these boarders may sit for hours, sometimes days and sometimes long enough they get discharged from that status—so never reaching the level of health care we would like to provide."

Teacher and staff shortages at St. Louis-area schools have forced some districts to return to virtual learning temporarily. Normandy High School, St. Louis Language Immersion School and Lafayette Prep will have virtual learning until January 18. A dozen other private schools have moved to virtual learning so far this year. The Illinois schools in St. Louis's Metro East will begin in-person learning January 18 after having begun the 2022 school

session virtually.

The Missouri state government is actively obstructing efforts to keep students and school staff safe. On January 11, the State Board of Education ruled to keep a 36-hour-per-year limit on online instruction for schools. If schools are forced to temporarily close due to staffing issues, the school year could be extended. Normandy School Board member Mike Jones called those who are blocking online learning "Neanderthals who belong to a different age" over their refusal to allow districts to switch part of the school year to online.

Some Missouri school districts have reimposed mask mandates. Fox C-6 School District, the largest district in Jefferson County, imposed a mandate January 6 for at least two weeks. The district had ended its previous mandate in November. St. Louis County's Rockwood School District has a mask mandate in place through February 3. The district was previously mulling whether to recommend but not mandate masks. Large districts in St. Charles County, Wentzville and Fort Zumwalt continue to fail to mandate masks.

Staffing issues reached crisis levels in Columbia Public Schools. The district's COVID-19 dashboard reported that for the week of January 10, the district needed 316 substitute teachers but only 138 staffed classes. This fill rate of 43.9 percent is the district's lowest since the pandemic began. Classes had to be split, meaning that half of the students went to one classroom and the other half went to a different classroom, with a different teacher.

A teacher who asked for anonymity spoke to KOMU about the stress of the situation. "Nobody's saying anything to us. It's like, are we teetering on the brink of this? Is no help coming? Because it's not getting any better." The lack of consistency in what classes will be taught on a given day is affecting the performance of the teachers and the students. "I can tell you that it has been a big point of frustration. It basically negates all of the planning that you have done," said the teacher. "It brings the learning to a halt."

Another anonymous teacher sent this to KOMU: "It feels

like we are experiencing ‘Institutional Betrayal’ at every level so it’s hard to know where to start. The mitigation strategies from the district are not reassuring and read like lip service because they are just words with no real actions attached.”

On January 10, approximately 120 students at Columbia’s Hickman High School walked out of classes wearing masks to protest the school board’s decision to end mask mandates at the beginning of the year. Some 2,500 students and community members signed a Change.org petition in support of calling an emergency meeting to reconsider the dropping of the mask mandate. As of this writing, the school board has ignored these protests.

Two major St. Louis attractions, the St. Louis Art Museum and the buildings that make up the Missouri Historical Society, will close until February 1. Lindsay Newton, director of education and community engagement for the Missouri Historical Society, released a statement saying, “The number of COVID cases among our staff has increased. In general, [we’ve seen] a steep spike in individuals who have been exposed. And we want to be as safe as possible.” The Saint Louis Science Center will also close until February 3.

In addition to the illnesses and deaths, a sign that the pandemic continues to affect Missouri’s population financially is found in the fact that St. Louis City has paused applications for one-time \$500 assistance payments. Ten thousand people have applied for the grants, but the city will fulfill a maximum of 9,300.

Patients are experiencing longer emergency room wait times. Kristyl Frazier spoke to KMOV about taking her mother, who is a stroke survivor, to St. Louis’s Barnes Jewish Hospital after she experienced chest pains. Kristyl took her mother inside the Emergency Department at 5 pm. “Luckily, my mother didn’t have to be admitted, but by the time they saw her and did all the CAT scans... This was close to 1:00 a.m.”

Area hospitals are postponing elective surgeries to deal with the new influx of COVID-19 patients. BJC HealthCare sent out an email stating, “Due to the large number of patients in our hospitals right now, it’s important to keep non-emergency cases out of the ERs and Convenient Care sites so our team members can focus on sick patients.”

Hospitals are also turning away community members who want to receive a COVID test. SSM Health has not suspended tests for asymptomatic people but has asked that they do not go to the Emergency Department for testing. “It gets in the way of us seeing the patients who are truly sick, like people who have heart attacks or people who are having a stroke. It just overwhelms us,” SSM St. Joseph Hospital-St. Charles ER Medical Director Dr. Benjamin Leacock told

KSDK. He requested that the public go to a hospital for tests only if showing severe symptoms like labored breathing or heavy nausea.

BJC has stopped providing tests for asymptomatic people entirely. Mercy Health is considering suspending testing. On January 8, a St. Louis Metropolitan Pandemic Task Force update reported staffed bed hospital capacity at 88 percent in the metro area, with ICUs at 81 percent of their total staffed bed capacity.

Hospital masking policies have also become more stringent. Mercy Hospital now requires medical-grade masks for all employees and visitors; it will provide masks to the public as needed. BJC Hospital requires medical-grade masks for all employees and contractors.

The surge of the Omicron variant has also brought the return of empty grocery store shelves for some items as in early 2020. Mel Ide told KMOV, “It doesn’t surprise me one bit because people get panicky,” while looking in vain for cough drops at the Maplewood CVS. Dr. Anna Bailey with Mercy Clinic Primary Care speculated that the cold and flu aisles are sold out because most people who get the Omicron variant are able to self-treat at home. “We treat the symptoms, and since the symptoms of the flu, COVID-19 and even the common cold overlap, so does your treatment for it,” she said. Walgreens and CVS issued public statements stating that there is a nationwide shortage of cold and flu products at this time. Nationally there is a 15 percent unavailability rate for grocery store products; normally the rate is 5-10 percent

Two Walmart stores in the St. Louis area, the Arnold and Bridgeton locations, temporarily closed for up to 48 hours for deep cleaning in response to the rising number of cases.

COVID is causing continued staffing shortages in local government offices. It was announced that from January 13 to March 7, some St. Louis County revenue offices will no longer allow walk-ins. St. Louis County Executive Dr. Sam Page explained in a press conference that more than 80 revenue department employees were not working or were quarantined because of the virus. He also announced that County council meetings will return to meeting virtually. Jury trials in St. Louis Circuit Court will be held virtually until March 7 and judges will hold remote hearings.



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