New Zealand government slashes funding for COVID response

Tom Peters
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Even as thousands of people have been made homeless and at least five have died in New Zealand's worst storm in decades, the country continues to experience a simultaneous disaster caused by the removal of all COVID-19 public health measures.

With little media coverage, the Ministry of Health reported another 32 deaths from COVID-19 last week, including two people aged in their 20s. There were 171 people in hospital with COVID on Sunday night. According to the ministry, since the pandemic began 2,513 people are confirmed to have died as a result of COVID and a further 477 are not confirmed but had COVID when they died—a total of nearly 3,000 deaths.

Officials make the extraordinary claim that another 938 people died with COVID but the virus did not contribute to their death. If they were added to the pandemic toll, it would be 3,928.

New Zealand has recorded nearly 2.2 million COVID-19 cases since the start of the pandemic and 26,022 hospitalisations for the virus. The government refuses to keep track of Long COVID, but a study by Victoria University of Wellington researchers published last month concluded that 300,000 people may be suffering from the severe condition.

The vast majority of cases and all but 59 deaths from COVID occurred in 2022–2023, after the Labour Party-led government scrapped the previous elimination policy and reopened schools and businesses, with then-prime minister Jacinda Ardern echoing false claims that the Omicron variant was "mild." Mask and vaccine mandates and social distancing measures are now all gone.

Since Ardern's resignation in January, in response to plummeting support for Labour, the government has taken further steps to dismantle the official response to the pandemic.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins announced a cabinet reshuffle on January 31, supposedly to refocus on what he called "bread and butter issues like the cost of living, education, health, housing." One of the most significant changes was the disestablishment of the COVID-19 Response ministerial portfolio, previously held by Ayesha Verrall, who has been promoted to health minister.

This has been accompanied by drastic funding cuts. National Public Health Service director Nick Chamberlain told *Newsroom* on February 8 that the overall funding to support the COVID-19 response "through until 30 June 2023 will be about $540 million. This is less than a quarter of the equivalent cost in the first half of 2022, and less than half of the cost for the second half of 2022."

The cuts include staffing reductions and the closure of vaccination centres and call centres where patients can get information. In addition, COVID-related funding for doctors' practices has been slashed by about 70 percent.

As of February 13, most people need to pay to visit a general practitioner within six weeks of their infection—something that was previously free. There are exemptions for high-risk groups: M?ori, Pacific islanders, people with a disability or a high-risk medical condition, and people aged over 65.

The *New Zealand Herald* reported that "chart reviews for all cases, post-hospital discharge follow-ups and patient-initiated follow-ups within six weeks of diagnosis would no longer be funded following consultation from the primary care sector."

The changes will have a major impact on working-class patients who are struggling with soaring costs for food, fuel and housing. Inevitably, many will be forced to choose between paying for medical care and paying

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their bills or feeding their families. It will become even harder for someone to be properly diagnosed with Long COVID and receive treatment.

Dr Bryan Betty, medical director of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners expressed alarm, telling *One News*: “Especially for patients that have been in hospital with COVID, it is critically important that there is integration back into their general practice and GP to manage their condition and we felt quite strongly that that should be a free visit after a hospital admission.”

Due to reduced funding for rapid antigen tests (RATs), Auckland doctor Sapna Samant said she was concerned that many COVID cases could go undetected at general practices, posing greater risks for patients.

Brushing aside such concerns, Health Service spokesperson Matt Hannant told *One News* now was the right time for the cutbacks because “we’re in summer, we’ve got low case numbers about under 1,000 a day.”

The daily case numbers are completely unreliable. The government chose not to encourage testing for asymptomatic cases, in order to keep people at work even if they have COVID.

Hospitalisations are currently down from a peak of nearly 600 before Christmas, but the end of the school holidays earlier this month will inevitably be followed by increased transmission, hospitalisations and deaths. Masks are not required in schools and nor are air filters or other mitigation measures. The increased homelessness and overcrowding caused by Cyclone Gabrielle could also facilitate the spread of COVID.

The dismantling of all measures to stop the spread of COVID, and ongoing cuts to related healthcare services, should give pause to anyone who believes that the government will provide ongoing assistance to people affected by the historic flooding.

The priority of the Labour-Greens government is to slash spending and maintain ultra-low taxes for the rich and corporations. In New Zealand, as is the case in every country, the ruling class is forcing working people to pay for the worsening economic crisis through austerity measures, along with inflation, increased unemployment and by driving down wages.

Meanwhile, due to the neglect and underfunding of the public health system, the population remains vulnerable not only to COVID but to other serious diseases as well. In an alarming development, on February 13 the Health Service confirmed a case of measles, for the first time since a disastrous outbreak in 2019.

The infected person, who had arrived from overseas, spent several days—from February 5 to 11—travelling around Auckland, Tauranga and Mount Maunganui. Measles is far more infectious than COVID-19.

Doctors warned that in the four years since the last measles outbreak, vaccination rates have fallen to even more dangerous levels. The *New Zealand Herald* reported: “As of December, 82 percent of 2-year-olds were up to date with their immunisations, down from 91 per cent before the pandemic. For M?ori children, the rate is just 66 per cent. Coverage of 90 to 95 per cent is needed for herd immunity.”

The 2019 measles outbreak caused 2,200 infections mostly in Auckland and Northland and spread to the impoverished Pacific country of Samoa, where the disease killed 83 children and put 1,868 in hospital.

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