

Measles outbreak continues to expand in Chicago due to overcrowding in migrant shelter

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As of Monday evening, eight Chicagoans have been diagnosed with measles, four of them asylum seekers residing at a migrant shelter in the Pilsen neighborhood. The outbreak of measles is a consequence of the brutal and overcrowded conditions at migrant facilities overseen by the Democratic Party as well as the ruling class's complete abdication of responsibility to maintain public health infrastructure.

The Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) announced on Thursday, March 7, that the city had recorded its first case of measles since 2019. The source of infection for the first case, who has been identified in media reports simply as a city "resident," is unknown. According to CDPH, the resident "reported interaction with domestic and international travelers."

On Friday, March 8, CDPH announced it had confirmed a second case of measles in a young child living at the Pilsen shelter, the same facility in which five-year-old Jean Carlos Martinez Rivero died in December of multiple infections. The facility has been notorious for its crowded conditions, in which 1,896 or so currently reside. The conditions at the shelter have fostered widespread illness, compounded by the failure of the administration of Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson to provide adequate healthcare to those living there.

A second case in a child at the shelter was confirmed on Sunday. The second child, who was hospitalized, was school-aged, attending a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) elementary school. On Monday, two adults at the same facility tested positive.

The first two cases were announced March 7 and 8, after the two sick individuals were no longer infectious,

even though both of them sought care on February 27, one at Swedish Hospital and the other at Stroger Hospital, a public hospital run by Cook County Health. The patient who sought care at Swedish Hospital evidently rode the bus, potentially infecting other riders on that route who may have sat in the same bus even hours later.

As measles can be transmitted for around eight days, this 9-10 day gap in informing the public means a potentially large number of unknown individuals have already been exposed to the disease. Measles is highly communicable, infecting 90 percent of unvaccinated individuals. A request for information from CDPH as to why this gap occurred has so far remained unanswered.

The mumps, measles and rubella (MMR) vaccine can prevent infection of unvaccinated individuals if administered within 72 hours, while immune globulin injections can work to prevent the disease if given within six days. In other words, the delay by the city in mounting an aggressive contact tracing and public information campaign has potentially consigned a number of individuals to infection with a highly dangerous disease.

In line with the inhumane treatment accorded to migrants in Chicago, according to Block Club Chicago, shelter residents were awakened by CPDH officials accompanied by a police escort at 1 a.m. Friday, March 8. They were told there was a measles outbreak and that they were under quarantine for 10 days.

The facility's doors were locked and shelter residents, treated like criminals, were told that anyone who left without proving they had been vaccinated for measles or previously had been infecting with measles would lose their place and be tossed out on the street,

even though this would potentially contribute to a further spread of measles in the community.

Over the weekend, CDPH, Cook County Health, Rush University Medical Center and the University of Illinois-Chicago assessed the shelter residents, administering the MMR vaccine to 900 people. Around 700 were found to have previous vaccination or infection and given the ability to enter and leave the facility. Those who were administered the vaccine were ordered to remain at the shelter for 21 days, until the vaccine takes full effect.

The detention of asylum seekers in cramped conditions is not only inhuman, but risks their collective health. Measles, with a long incubation period, requires they be separated and provided safe places with access to healthcare, food and financial support. The measles and COVID-19 outbreaks in Pilsen exemplifies the complete disregard of officials to their health and wellbeing.

CDPH commissioner Dr. Simbo Ige said in a statement, “We have advised all unvaccinated and newly vaccinated residents of the quarantine period but some of those residents have left the shelter, and I want to acknowledge that.”

Some of these residents have no doubt concluded that they are more likely to become infected staying at the facility and chose to take their chances, even though that might cause them to infect others.

On Monday, CDPH announced that several dozen residents with previous immunity were being moved from the shelter “to begin ramping up quarantine logistics.” In other words, officials need to make room to account for the fact that residents forced to stay in the facility will not be able to endure the cramped conditions for weeks on end without some relief of the crowded conditions. Some people being quarantined are apparently also being moved to hotels.

According to CDPH’s Monday statement, healthcare teams are being deployed to shelters across the city to provide MMR vaccines to unvaccinated asylum-seekers, and vaccines will now be administered as part of the intake process, with proof required for shelter placement.

The scale of the city’s response at shelter facilities underscores the danger of measles. However, it is clear that the time public health officials allowed the virus to circulate before taking action has created the conditions

for a dangerous escalation of the outbreak, a point which is underscored by the city’s request for help from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A CDC team was scheduled to arrive Tuesday to provide assistance with contact tracing and clinical guidance, as well as testing coordination. The team will also be conducting outreach, as decades of anti-science obscurantism, the collapse of public health education and the general lack of access to healthcare among workers have led to many schools having vaccination rates below the target 95 percent recommended by the CDC.

Since last week, the CDC has confirmed 45 measles cases in 17 states, though this number will undoubtedly grow. Aside from the outbreak in Chicago, as many as 300 people were exposed to measles at the UC Davis Medical Center’s emergency department in Sacramento, California, on March 5.

Mayor Johnson has remained mostly silent on the measles outbreak. On Monday, at an unrelated event, Johnson spoke to reporters about the efforts of CDPH in vaccinating residents at the shelter in Pilsen. Johnson also revealed something about his own anti-science attitudes as well as those prevalent in petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left layers when he suggested vaccine hesitancy had something to do with low vaccination rates at the shelter, “There are some individuals, whether you’re a migrant or not, people that have some hesitancy and some reticence around it. And so, we’re doing some real serious education.”

In fact, for most asylum seekers, a lack of MMR vaccination is the result of the near total collapse of the healthcare system in Venezuela, from which many of them have fled as a result of that country’s economic destruction by US sanctions.



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