

El Paso imposes curfew as virus cases overwhelm hospitals

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Residents in the Texas border city of El Paso have been urged to stay home for two weeks as a spike in coronavirus cases overwhelms hospitals, prompting the state to dedicate part of the city's civic center as a makeshift care center for the ill.

El Paso County Judge Ricardo Samaniego on Sunday night issued a stay home order with a daily curfew from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. Violators could be fined \$500 under the order, but the curfew does not apply to people who are going to or from work or out for essential services, including grocery stores and healthcare.

"We are in a crisis stage," said Samaniego, the county's top elected official.

On Monday, the county reported a new record high in daily coronavirus cases, with 1,443 cases of the virus recorded. That breaks the daily record of 1,216 cases set Saturday.

The county had 853 patients hospitalized for the virus on Monday, up from 786 a day earlier.

Earlier Sunday, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said 50 hospital beds will be set up in the convention center and another 50 beds could be added if needed.

Abbott ordered the alternate care site to expand hospital capacity in the El Paso area in response to the coronavirus surge, he said. The site, scheduled to open this week, will provide additional medical equipment and medical personnel.

Dr. David Persse, chief medical officer for the city of Houston, on Monday said at a press conference that they have been coordinating with state officials to move patients from El Paso—and potentially Amarillo, Lubbock, and the Rio Grande Valley—to Dallas, Austin, San Antonio and Houston. He was told Saturday that they could get 2 to 4 patients a day, said Persse, who added that he was unaware of whether they had already received patients.

"The plan is in place, the connections have been made," he said. "At this point it looks like the volume of patients to be moved will be very, very small, and let's hope it stays that way."

The surge in El Paso cases comes as President Donald Trump downplayed the virus' effect on Texas, saying during last week's presidential debate: "There was a very big spike in Texas, it's now gone."

The state has already provided over 900 medical personnel to El Paso, some of whom will be staffing the convention center site.

"The alternate care site and auxiliary medical units will reduce the strain on hospitals in El Paso as we contain the spread of COVID-19 in the region," Abbott said.

As of Monday, Texas has reported a total of 867,075 virus cases statewide since the pandemic began, an increase of 4,700 from Sunday. The true number of cases in the state is likely higher though

because many people haven't been tested, and studies suggest people can be infected and not feel sick.

An estimated 93,479 active cases was the most since Aug. 29, and the 5,278 COVID-19 hospitalizations reported statewide Sunday was the most since Aug. 21. Meanwhile, 10 more COVID-19 fatalities were reported Monday, bringing the toll for the pandemic in Texas to 17,514 deaths.

For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and a cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death.

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