

California reports record virus death count as cases spiral

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California reported more than 53,000 new coronavirus cases and 293 deaths on Wednesday, setting new daily records as hospitals struggled to keep up with the surge.

Southern California and the state's Central Valley—regions that together include 23 counties and most of the state's nearly 40 million residents—had exhausted their regular supply of intensive care beds and many hospitals were tapping into their "surge" capacity.

Los Angeles County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer said the transmission of the virus is rampant and noted two people are dying every hour in the county.

"We're experiencing an explosive and very deadly surge," Ferrer said.

California has seen coronavirus cases and hospitalizations soar in recent weeks. Hospitals are filling up so fast that officials are rolling out mobile field facilities and scrambling to hire doctors and nurses, while the state is distributing 5,000 body

bags mostly to the hard-hit Los Angeles and San Diego areas and has 60 refrigerated trailers standing by as makeshift morgues.

Most of the state's residents are under a stay-at-home order because of dwindling intensive care unit capacity where they live. Los Angeles County has 2,500 ICU beds but within a month could easily need far more, said Dr. Christina Ghaly, the county's health services director.

"Hospitals are under siege and our models show no end in sight," she said.

California is averaging more than 35,000 newly reported coronavirus cases a day. Health officials estimate 12% of them—4,200—end up in hospitals.

The massive rise in infections began in October and is being blamed largely on people ignoring safety measures and socializing with others. More recently, health officials said they've seen cases stemming from gatherings during the Thanksgiving holiday and have pleaded with residents to avoid getting together with people from other households over Christmas and New Year's.

The record tally of 53,711 cases reported Wednesday included 15,337 older cases that were added because of a new data collection method, according to the state Department of Public Health. But even without those, the daily total was the most during the pandemic.

Hospitalizations are now are nearly 15,000 and California now is averaging 177 deaths per day.

Hospitals administered the first Pfizer vaccines to healthcare workers this week while coping with swamped emergency rooms continually filling with virus patients.

Jeremy Zoch, chief executive at Providence St. Joseph Hospital of Orange, said nurses, respiratory

therapists and housekeepers have been taking extra shifts to help out. Registry and traveling nurses have come in and officials are talking to a nearby children's hospital about using additional space to care for patients, he said.

"It has challenged us so every single one of our units that we have available to us we've been redesigning them and utilizing them to care for COVID patients," Zoch told reporters. "It is really challenging us on the capacity front. Our ICUs are very close to full."

Also in Southern California's Orange County, UCI Health is planning to add a 50-bed mobile field unit by Christmas. The goal is to keep up with anticipated demand due to the rising number of virus cases, said Dr. Nasim Afsar, chief operating officer at UCI Health.

"Every day we work through and we discharge the appropriate number of people and by the next day all of those beds are again filled up," she said.

"We can easily see over the next several weeks we are not going to have any capacity for patients."

The crushing caseload is taking its toll on health care workers. Hospitals are scouring for space to add more beds but they also need to staff those beds, and many doctors, nurses, housekeepers and others are already working extra shifts.

"There's so much stress on us," said Dr. Mohamed Fayed, critical care specialist at UCSF in Fresno. "Nurses and physicians and all the health care workers are really working so hard through this, hours and hours and hours and hours per day nonstop."

On Wednesday, California announced the San Francisco Bay Area would join three of the state's five regions already under a state-mandated stay-at-home order as ICU available beds dropped below 15%. The regions of greater Sacramento, the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California are already under Gov. Gavin Newsom's order, which closes businesses including hair and nail salons and movie theaters and severely limits retail operations.

The Northern California region, which includes Humboldt, Lake and Mendocino counties, is not affected for now.

Many of the Bay Area's counties had already applied the order as a precaution and those that hadn't must now do so on Thursday.

In Santa Clara County, which had already applied the shutdown rules, infections are topping 1,000 per day, compared with 300 in July, said Dr. Marty Fenstersheib, the county's testing director.

"We're not anywhere out of the woods yet," he said.

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