


'January is going to be a very rough time': COVID-19 surge puts hospitals on overload

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Arizona's COVID-19 surge taking a toll on health care workers

While the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines brings hope, there's no clear end in sight to a crush of patients crowding Arizona hospitals.

A dwindling number of ICU beds.

An increase in patients waiting in emergency departments for an inpatient bed to open up.

More patients double bunking in hospital rooms meant for one person.

Welcome to the "surge within a surge" in Arizona.

Patients began filling up Arizona hospitals about two weeks after Thanksgiving,

and the crunch is expected to grow in the next few weeks because of holiday travel and gatherings over Christmas and New Year's.

"The next few weeks are going to be bad. I'll be blunt. Unless a miraculous turn occurs, we're going to see things continue on the rise from the last two holidays through the month of January," said Dr. Ross Goldberg, a general surgeon in Phoenix who is president of the Arizona Medical Association.

"The concern is that January is going to be a very rough time."

The dire warnings are now coming with indications that care is being compromised.

Some hospitals have stopped elective surgeries; there's a need for more front-line workers; and Phoenix area hospitals last week started temporarily closing to incoming emergency transports and hospital transfers because of overwhelming patient counts.

Arizona's daily rate of new COVID-19 cases led the country on Wednesday for a third day in a row at 118.3 cases per 100,000 people, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's COVID Tracker said.

Johns Hopkins University data shows that Arizona has the highest number of COVID-19 cases per day in the world when normalized by population, said Dr. Marjorie Bessel, chief clinical officer for Banner Health, which is Arizona's largest health care delivery system.

"Currently, our ICU occupancy is 70% higher than it was at the same time last year," Bessel said in a briefing on Wednesday. "The current state of care in our hospitals cannot be defined as usual and customary. It is stretching us to our limits, and our predictive models indicate that it will only get worse."

Three percent of the ICU beds in Pima County were available Tuesday morning. At one point, 95 patients ill enough to need hospital admissions were being cared for in southern Arizona emergency rooms because inpatient beds were not available for them.

About 60 of those patients were positive for COVID-19, said Dr. Theresa Cullen, Pima County Health Department director.

"What that means is we back up the whole clinical care system," she said. "People waiting for beds is not unusual. You hear of patients who have been in emergency rooms prior to COVID, their families report them waiting 12 hours to get a bed. It's not uncommon. ... It's the number that we're seeing, which is higher than we would normally have seen."

Banner Health is also reporting patients waiting in emergency rooms for inpatient beds. In some cases, those patients may need to be transported to another hospital that has better availability, officials said. Discharges are slower than usual because COVID-19 patients, once they are hospitalized, tend to stay in the hospital for longer than non-COVID patients.

"It is not an unusual scenario when we're in a winter season with a lot of patients for patients to be waiting in an emergency department for their inpatient bed," Bessel said. "What is very different at this time is that the overload is felt widely across all Banner hospitals at this time. ... The overloading of our hospitals is forecasted to last for many, many, many more weeks."

Not a single ICU bed was available at Valleywise Health Medical Center in central Phoenix on Wednesday morning, and two patients were in the emergency department awaiting a hospital bed. Those waits for a bed can vary from a few hours to two days, said Dr. Michael White, Valleywise's chief medical officer.

"It depends on how many patients we're able to discharge from the hospital or transition to an extended care facility or a long-term care facility," White said during a Wednesday briefing. "The wait may be anywhere from two hours to upwards of 24 to 48 hours.

"If we are holding patients in the emergency department, it means that we do not have the ability, from usually a staffing perspective, to take care of patients outside of an emergency setting."

Hospitals in Arizona are typically busy during the winter months because of winter visitors and flu season. While the flu has been minimal this season, COVID-19 is stretching hospitals because patients tend to be much sicker than those who are ill with the flu.

The average time on a ventilator for a patient with COVID-19 has been 11 days within Banner Health, compared with three to four days for non-COVID patients.


As of Tuesday, a record 4,877 patients with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 were hospitalized across Arizona, which is 28% higher than the peak of the summer surge. As of Wednesday, 61% of all ICU beds in Arizona were occupied by COVID-19 patients.

"Certainly, 60% of the beds in the intensive care units are attributed to patients with COVID-19, and of course that is not sustainable," said Joshua LaBaer, director of the ASU Biodesign Institute and leader of the university's COVID-19 research efforts.

"Hospitals right now are basically primarily managing patients with COVID-19, and of course we know that hospitals are really there to manage all the other

illnesses that typically occur, particularly at this time of year. ... They are getting crowded out by COVID-19."



 **8 Photos**

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Take a look inside a COVID-19 ICU ward in Arizona

As COVID-19 brutalizes Arizona, a look inside Tucson Medical Center provides a snapshot of what hospitals in the state are experiencing during the pandemic.

Hospitals keep adding beds and hiring more nurses and respiratory therapists, front-line workers are skipping vacations and adding extra shifts, and the number of COVID-19 patients continues to rise.

Some health care providers are concerned that Arizona could experience difficulties providing care that are happening in Los Angeles County, where officials are trying to ration medical supplies and space, according to media reports.

The Los Angeles Emergency Medical Services Agency issued two memos on Monday instructing emergency responders to limit the use of supplemental oxygen and not to transport patients who cannot be resuscitated in the field, USA TODAY [reported](#) this week.

Arizona is 'the hottest hot spot for COVID'

Health care leaders from across the state have asked Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey and Arizona Department of Health Services Director Dr. Cara Christ for more aggressive mitigation measures that they say will decrease the chances of COVID-19 transmission, including a ban on indoor dining, a ban on gatherings of more than 25 people and a statewide mask mandate.

Individual jurisdictions are making their own mask requirements, but there's currently no universal statewide policy.

"The fact that we have not limited to a great extent our indoor dining and some of the other mitigation factors that we had recommended in December, that is also likely leading to some of this increased transmission," White said Wednesday.

"Certainly mitigation in early December would have helped us decrease the burden that we are likely going to see now."

White was one of eight Arizona health leaders who sent a letter to Christ on Dec. 2 that called for stricter interventions amid the current surge, including a statewide curfew, a ban on youth sports tournaments, a prohibition on gatherings of more than 25 people and a ban on indoor dining.



Dr. Marjorie Bessel, chief clinical officer at Banner Health, discusses the COVID-19 coronavirus testing process during a press conference in Phoenix on March 16, 2020. *Rob Schumacher/The Republic*

"The state of Arizona has now become the hottest hot spot for COVID. ... We are not doing a good job with this virus at this time during this surge of the pandemic," said Banner Health's Bessel, who also signed the letter.

"We need additional mitigation. We need enforcement of those mitigation activities. And we need everybody to do their own part. Please, you, shrink your circle, and wear your mask."

In a separate letter, six other major medical and health group leaders in Arizona on Dec. 17 asked Ducey for additional interventions for six to eight weeks, including a ban on indoor dining; closure of bars and nightclubs; except for essential services, a limit on public gatherings to no more than 25 people; and implementation of a statewide and enforceable face-covering mandate that focuses on business compliance rather than individuals.

"If there was action taken on the letter, I'm not aware of it," said Dr. Lee Ann Kelley, president of the Maricopa County Medical Society and one of those who signed it. "It didn't need to be this way. Action could have been taken and it wasn't. Restaurants are open for dining and they shouldn't be. They should only be open for delivery or carryout. ... Bars are still open."

If actions were taken now, including a statewide mask mandate, closing bars, limiting restaurants to carryout and delivery, the state would emerge more quickly from the crisis in February, Kelley said.

"Any interventions done today will show benefits in about a month in terms of limiting this cascade. The longer the bars stay open and the invitation to engage in that risky behavior is present, the more our case numbers will continue to amplify," she said.

Ducey has repeatedly said he has made decisions on COVID-19 mitigations based on what works best for Arizonans. He has noted adverse economic consequences of putting people out of work and has stressed there are other public health issues at play with taking more stringent measures, including suicide attempts, depression, social disconnection, child abuse and domestic violence.

"I'm listening to the smartest and best people in the medical profession and making the policy decisions that I believe in my heart are best for all the people of

Arizona," he said on Dec. 2.

'People don't seem to either believe us or care'

Arizona reported more than 17,200 new cases on Sunday, the highest number of new COVID-19 cases reported in a single day since the pandemic began, toppling the state's previous record from Dec. 8 by nearly 5,000 cases.

Sunday's record follows the Christmas and New Year's holiday weekends, which is troubling but not unexpected, said Goldberg, the surgeon.

"Unfortunately, I will tell you there is not a health care worker in the state that is surprised by what we are seeing right now given what we were watching the last couple of months. ... We predicted something like this happening and we weren't listened to," he said. "Look at California and how bad it is in LA County. That's a worrisome future if we can't kind of get ahead of this. The way our numbers are going up, it's very concerning. In our hospitals, we don't know what our limits are, but we don't want to find out, either."

At the same time, health care workers report feeling discouraged by members of the public who dispute the severity of the pandemic with remarks on social media, or by flouting social distancing measures like wearing masks and staying 6 feet apart from others, Goldberg said.

"It's frustrating that people don't seem to either believe us or care," he said. "The only way to break that is to grab them and pull them into one of our COVID units and let them see the isolated patients on a ventilator with all the tubes coming out of them. But we can't do that for lots of reasons. I don't know how else to get it across. We see it every day, and I don't know why they would think we would lie about this."

'I am sure there is a breaking point'

The COVID-19 death rate in Arizona was 128 per 100,000 people as of Wednesday, according to the CDC, putting it 13th in the country in a state ranking that separates New York City from New York state. The U.S. average is 107 deaths per 100,000 people, the CDC said. As of Wednesday, Arizona had reported 9,444 known deaths from COVID-19.

But deaths are a lagging indicator. First cases go up, then hospitalizations, and two to four weeks later deaths historically have spiked.

The peak of Arizona's second surge remains unclear. So far, hospitalizations have continued to go up without hitting any obvious plateau.

"In many cases, the belief is that the breaking point is more related to staff than to beds," Pima County's Cullen said. "For instance, we know there are enough ventilators. ... Is there a breaking point? I am sure there is a breaking point. I don't know what it is."

Everybody has a breaking point, echoed Bessel of Banner Health.

"Every hospital has a ceiling," she said. "It is our absolute hope and desire to not hit the ceiling, to not get much closer to the ceiling, and certainly not to break through that ceiling. But we can't do it by ourselves."

Officials in Pima County say that a county curfew combined with a public health advisory appears to be having a positive effect, with reports of bar and restaurant use down 3% over the last month, as well as slight decreases in travel and gatherings of 10 or more people, Pima County Medical Director Dr. Francisco Garcia said Tuesday.

"We can tell you that the behaviors of people in Pima County have changed modestly in the right direction," Garcia said. "Does that translate into decreases in infections? Right now, it's too early to tell," he said. "We're not that far out. These actions were taken on Dec. 7. But at least in terms of reported behaviors, they are trending in the right direction."

A public health advisory issued in Pima County on Dec. 21 warned that the health care system was in danger of being overwhelmed and among other things asked all businesses to reduce their occupancy to 25%.

"This isn't just about COVID anymore and whether you think it's a real problem or not. The patients filling these hospitals are absolutely real. And if you have a heart attack, or if you get into a car accident, or your appendix bursts, there is a real possibility that you may not get the timely care you need to save your life if we don't get control of this virus," Cullen said at the time.

"People are dying, yet many of those deaths are preventable if the people of this community stay home, wear their masks and avoid people they don't live with as much as possible," Cullen added.



COVID-19 vaccines are rolling out across Arizona

The coronavirus vaccine is being distributed at distribution sites across Arizona, including at the State Farm Stadium in Glendale.

White of Valleywise Health said the vaccine is a hopeful sign, but it will be "months" before Arizonans will be able to decrease social distancing measures.

"If we don't continue to do this, we are in danger of overwhelming our clinical departments and our hospitals," he said. "It's not just COVID care. It's the other care that we may not have the ability to deliver if our resources are overwhelmed."