

No New Measures to Slow Current Outbreak as Vaccines Offer Distant Hope

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Governor Doug Ducey has rejected calls for stronger mitigation measures. / Screenshot

This evening, nine frontline workers will be injected with their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

In a few weeks, after they receive a second dose, those workers – nurses, firefighters, a doctor– will be largely protected against the novel coronavirus.

They will need that protection, as the coming weeks are expected to be the worst Arizona has seen since the pandemic began and Governor Doug Ducey has indicated no willingness to take the emergency measures that experts are calling for.

Arizona is currently averaging 6,660 new people infected with COVID-19 each day. It's estimated that each **100 people infected pass on their infection to an additional 119 people**, meaning COVID-19 is spreading faster in Arizona than any other state.

Dr. Joe Gerald, a researcher at the University of Arizona's college of public health, said in a weekly report released last Friday that the state has all but locked in a major humanitarian crisis during the holiday season which will see hundreds of preventable deaths each week.

"At this point, only shelter-in-place restrictions are certain to quickly and sufficiently curtail viral transmission," Gerald wrote, adding that any such measures should be accompanied by economic assistance to offset their impact.

Joshua LaBaer, executive director of Arizona State University's Biodesign Institute, told the press today that he agreed with Gerald's predictions on the severity of what the state is facing.

"The hospital system, if not already overwhelmed now, it very shortly will be," LaBaer said in a livestreamed briefing. "We're hearing already reports of medical staff who are exhausted and overwhelmed. There is no obvious let-up in sight for them."

Dr. Michael White, Valleywise Health's chief clinical officer, said in another press conference today that the hospital had to move six patients out of the intensive-care unit earlier this week due to a lack of space. While beds have

since opened up, White said COVID-19 patients are needing care for a month or more, filling up beds much longer than other patients.

If things continue this way, putting intensive-care patients in other parts of the hospital will become the norm, he said.

"It puts a strain on our team. It puts a strain on our frontline healthcare workers," White said. When asked how long they could deal with that strain, White said he hoped not to find out.

Ten Valley hospitals had their intensive-care units more than 90 percent occupied as of last week, according to weekly averages aggregated by the federal government **and mapped by the *New York Times***.

Of the hardest hit, St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix had 119 COVID-19 patients; Banner Thunderbird Medical Center in Glendale had 149 COVID-19 patients; Banner Baywood Medical Center in Mesa had 153 COVID-19 patients; and Chandler Regional Medical Center in Chandler had 102 COVID-19 patients.

None of those hospitals had more than five available intensive-care beds.

Despite this dire situation, at a press conference today the governor showed no intention of implementing any further mitigation measures to slow the spread of the virus.

"We're doing everything we can in the public square to slow the spread of this virus," Ducey said. "Now, we're asking people to be personally responsible, and I have every confidence they will be."

The governor said he would be distributing an additional \$15 million to the Department of Health Services (DHS) and repeated a talking point about how the spread of COVID-19 is being caused by gatherings in private homes.

Will Humble, the executive director of the Arizona Public Health Association and a former state DHS director, has disputed that argument. In a *Phoenix New Times* article published earlier this week, Humble pointed to a study that found restaurants are among a small number of locations causing the bulk of COVID-19 infections.

"If you look at the literature, it tells you where the dominant spread happens. It's in restaurants and bars," Humble said. "Is there intra-family spread? Absolutely. If you were to have a large Thanksgiving gathering is there an increased chance of indoor spread? Of course. It's not one or the other, it's both. Where you have regulatory control, which is bars, restaurants, and night clubs, you should maximize that. There's no regulatory control over families."

Medical leaders from healthcare systems in Arizona have also called on Ducey to implement further mitigation measures.

Dr. Marjorie Bessel, chief clinical officer at Banner Health, the state's largest healthcare provider, told the press last Wednesday that she is hoping the governor would increase measures.

While vaccinations of frontline healthcare workers are beginning this week, LaBaer warned that the vaccine will not make a difference in the current COVID-19 outbreak.

"The amount [of vaccine] that is available at the moment will not have any impact on the numbers we just talked about," he said.

Distribution to the general public isn't expected until summer, and 70 percent of the population will need to be vaccinated or immune to make a difference, LaBaer said.

Current modeling suggests that without further mitigation the current outbreak will peak in late January or early February at a very high rate.

"That suggests something like 200,000 active cases in the state," LaBaer said.

Some local jurisdictions are taking matters into their own hands. Pima County supervisors voted Tuesday to **implement a mandatory 10 p.m. curfew** for the county, following the lead of the city of Tucson.

When asked about local leaders who had sent request to for further state-level measures, Ducey said they should be focusing more on enforcing existing measures, which he claimed were sufficient if enforced.

"If these mitigation measures continue to be followed with accountability,

we'll be able to navigate through this," he said.

He called on Arizonans to wash their hands, stay socially distant and limit gatherings over the holidays.