

NEWS

Some hospitals forced to wait-list or transfer patients as Wisconsin's coronavirus surge continues

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Some Wisconsin hospitals are resorting to wait-listing patients, or sending them to other facilities, as the state's coronavirus surge continues to rage.

Hospitals have been especially overwhelmed in Green Bay, Wausau and the Fox Valley, which are among the state's latest COVID-19 hot spots.

Officials at Bellin Hospital in Green Bay, for example, said the facility was at 94% capacity as of Tuesday, just days before a Saturday campaign rally for President Donald Trump that could draw thousands of supporters to the city.

State health officials on Tuesday also acknowledged Wisconsin is closer than ever to opening a state-run field hospital due to the surge in cases — even as they stressed they still hope the overflow facilities won't be needed.

The number of people hospitalized in Wisconsin due to the virus reached a new high Tuesday, with 646 coronavirus patients occupying beds across the state, including 205 patients in ICU beds.

Matthew Heywood, president and CEO of Aspirus Healthcare, said the Wausau hospital has a sporadic waitlist. He stressed that the number of people on the waitlist fluctuates, as do wait times, which he said range from a couple of hours to 24 hours or longer.

The system had 61 patients Tuesday who either have COVID-19 or are suspected to have the virus and are awaiting test results. That was a 30% jump from Monday when there were 47 such cases.

As facilities fill up, he warned, the surge may affect residents needing a hospital visit for other conditions.

The problem is "how do we care for you when you have an accident when we have an overflow of COVID patients," Heywood said. "There's only so much you can do before you start to overwhelm the system."

Brian Hoerneman, director of emergency care at Marshfield Medical Center in Marshfield, said that as the facility's COVID-19 unit has filled up, staff there have used other areas of the hospital to accommodate increased volume.

"That's really been within the last week that we had to do that," he said.

Hospitals nearing capacity

With northeast Wisconsin experiencing an unprecedented spike in cases, Green Bay and Fox Valley-area hospitals warn they are near capacity.

At ThedaCare in the Fox Valley, hospital leaders have exceeded the room in their initial COVID-19 unit at their Appleton medical center and have begun sending patients to Neenah and critical access hospitals in Berlin, Shawano and Waupaca.

"Yes, we saw this coming but didn't expect it to be quite so rapid," said Michael Hooker, vice president and chief medical officer for acute care at ThedaCare.

He said if everyone used the tools available to slow infections — masks, physical distancing and hand-washing — we'd still see a gradual increase of hospitalizations over time. And if the community can start enacting those practices again, the curve could eventually be re-flattened.

But if no changes are made, he said, the growth rate of infections and hospitalizations will continue to rise exponentially.

"If it's growing the way that it has for the past week or so, we're going to be in a dire situation in two, three, four weeks," Hooker said.

As of Tuesday morning, Bellin Hospital was at 94% capacity, and CEO Chris Woleske said they were treating 31 patients with the virus, up from 26 on Friday.

Bellin hopes to convert a facility on its campus into another space for hospital beds and is teaching nonclinical workers, such as athletic trainers, how to deliver supplies and move patients so nurses can focus on duties only they can perform.

But even as the hospital adapts, Woleske urged residents to do their part to contain the virus so Bellin doesn't find itself forced to choose which services to provide.

"It's difficult for (staff) to see the numbers climbing the way that they are," she said.

Advocate Aurora Health has seen a steady increase in COVID patients in northern Wisconsin throughout September. "We are paying particularly close attention to that area as positivity rates continue to rise across the state," said spokeswoman LeeAnn Betz.

The Surge Section Chief for Ascension Wisconsin said that although hospitals in southeastern Wisconsin currently have plenty of capacity for patients, officials are concerned about record levels of coronavirus in northeast and north central Wisconsin.

"At this time, our hospitals in those locations are experiencing their highest COVID-19 inpatient volumes since the beginning of the pandemic," said Dr. Tom Nichols, Vice President, Medical Affairs, Ascension St. Elizabeth.

State watching case growth

State Health Services Secretary Andrea Palm and Ryan Westergaard, the department's chief medical officer, said Tuesday they had not received any reports of patients being turned away from hospitals or not provided care.

But Palm said some patients could be transferred to other hospitals as part of a regional surge plan that health care centers develop during epidemics like the coronavirus outbreak.

Such plans address "the transfer of patients, the sharing of workload, the sharing of staff, and so we certainly know and expect in situations where hospitals are having capacity stressors that they will employ some of those strategies with their partner hospitals around the region to make sure they can treat everyone who is coming into their care or make sure that care is received by, again, one of their partners," Palm said during a media briefing.

Westergaard said turning away patients "would not be consistent with practice in the state" and he would be surprised if patients were being denied care because of capacity issues.

The state's top health officials also said the spread of the virus is so prevalent that if the public does not change its behavior drastically, patients may begin to be directed to a field hospital built months ago that so far has been unneeded.

"We built that as the ultimate insurance policy," Palm said. "We are closer to getting to (needing them) than we ever have been."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a 530-bed facility on the state fairgrounds in West Allis over the course of 10 days in April. The \$15 million facility is one of more than 30 built quickly across the country as the pandemic hit the United States.

It would become the first of such facilities to be used.

"Turning the corner on this requires that we do things dramatically different," Westergaard said.

Hospitalizations for the coronavirus in Milwaukee County rose from 70 last week to 124 as of Tuesday, said Ben Weston, medical services director for Milwaukee County's Office of Emergency Management.

He said hospitals in southeastern Wisconsin have managed to stay ahead of the number of COVID cases by maximizing space but acknowledged the facility built earlier this year at Wisconsin State Fair's sprawling Expo Center may be needed.

"We do have an insurance policy, the alternative care facility for overflow, if needed," Weston said in a media briefing. "As far as whether it will be opened, we'll see what happens."

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett added: "I hope we never have to go to the State Fair site, but I'm happy it's there in case we need it."

Barrett noted that even though Milwaukee County, which had been a coronavirus hot spot in Wisconsin for much of the pandemic, has a significantly lower positivity rate than other parts of the state, and "there is no reason for anybody to say we got this."

"Clearly, it's not under control in the state of Wisconsin," Barrett said.

A total of 8,200 tests were administered last week in Milwaukee County. The percentage of tests that were positive for COVID was 4.9% two weeks ago, while last week it rose to 6.4% and now is at 8%.

Wisconsin's three VA medical health care systems —in Milwaukee, Madison and Tomah — have also seen a steady increase in the number of coronavirus cases since May. Statewide there are 119 active cases of coronavirus being treated in the state's VA health system, including 51 in Milwaukee.

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