

**WISCONSIN**

# Tony Evers to open field hospital at State Fair Park to provide relief for overwhelmed hospitals in Fox Valley, northern counties

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Gov. Tony Evers will open a 530-bed field hospital at State Fair Park next Wednesday to help hospitals in the Fox Valley and northern Wisconsin cope with a surge of COVID-19 patients that is leaving some facilities there with just a few open beds.

The state-run facility — one of a few of its kind nationwide — will serve patients who need help but aren't in need of hospital-level care in order to leave open beds in hospitals for more serious patients.

The move was announced the day the number of people hospitalized due to the coronavirus in Wisconsin inched toward 900 patients and a Fox Valley health care system leader said hospitals there were full.

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The 873 people receiving hospital care due to the virus on Wednesday represented an increase of 91 patients in two days and a jump of about 200 in the last week. There were 219 coronavirus patients in ICUs Wednesday.

"We hoped this day wouldn't come, but unfortunately, Wisconsin is in a much different, more dire place today and our health care systems are beginning to become overwhelmed by the surge of COVID-19 cases," Evers said Wednesday.

Evers said he was opening the field hospital at the urging of hospital officials in Green Bay, Appleton, Neenah and Wausau who are reporting that their ICUs are at capacity. They are transferring patients to other facilities and warning of critical staffing shortages.

"Our hospital system is strained and in some areas of the state reaching capacity and at risk of being overwhelmed," Health Services Secretary Andrea Palm said. "And as COVID-19 cases rise, hospitals across the state are experiencing critical staffing shortages – largely due to staff members experiencing infection or exposure to the virus in their communities."

In the Fox Valley, ThedaCare President and CEO Imran Andrabi told reporters Wednesday that his hospitals only have a few open beds. Early Tuesday morning, he said, not a single bed was available throughout the system.

Palm in a media briefing urged people to take the coronavirus pandemic seriously, warning that the surge in hospitalizations is affecting everyone who needs medical care, whether or not they have COVID-19.

"When hospitals are at capacity, it doesn't matter if you need care because of COVID-19 or a heart attack," she said.

The State Fair Park facility will not accept walk-in patients, but instead will coordinate with hospitals to admit patients who need care but are not seriously ill and in need of hospital-level care, officials said. Patients will be taken there by Flight for Life ground ambulances.

The field hospital is about 120 miles away from the areas of the state experiencing overwhelming surges of COVID-19 patients. Palm said the facility was needed quickly and able to be opened within a week of requests from hospitals because of the construction of the facility in the spring.

Palm said state health officials are looking at opening additional facilities in other parts of the state.

"It's important to understand that because of the investments we made in the spring that is what has positioned us to be able to open this current facility in a week," Palm told reporters.

The facility opens after hospitalizations in the state have tripled in one month and as health officials worry surges of new infections will result in even more COVID-19 patients in the coming weeks.

"This is going to get worse before it gets better," Palm said.

The surge of hospitalizations arrives at the same time Republican lawmakers are seeking to end Evers' health emergency and face mask mandate — a move that health officials worry will lead to even more infections.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, on Wednesday asked Evers for a meeting about the state's situation, saying "the surge of cases and hospitalizations is real" — possibly the first statement of its kind from Wisconsin Republican lawmakers who have been downplaying or ignoring the severity of the pandemic in the state.

"The governor and secretary-designee may have good intentions but they're disregarding the law," Vos said, referring to a state Supreme Court ruling in May that knocked down Evers' first health emergency. "We are confident that if challenged, a Wisconsin judge would find this order invalid."

The Evers administration contends the order is being issued under a separate portion of state law than the May court ruling covered and therefore is valid.

When asked why then such an order was not issued before Tuesday, an Evers spokeswoman said the hospital capacity issues coupled with an imminent ruling in the lawsuit to end the mask mandate pushed Evers to introduce new limits on public interaction.

Vos said Evers' "go-it-alone, grab-bag approach" to the coronavirus pandemic "has been a failure."

Vos and Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald sued Evers in May, resulting in the Supreme Court ruling knocking down Evers' powers and requiring him to go through a process known as rulemaking to implement COVID-19 policies. The legislative committee Evers must get approval from is led by two lawmakers who have said in the past no restrictions are needed.

Vos and Fitzgerald sued Evers over the health emergency and subsequent stay-at-home order saying they wanted a seat at the table on such policy changes. However, as soon as the ruling was handed down both said they didn't see a need for new restrictions.

"We would like to request a meeting with the governor as soon as possible to discuss answers to deal with the virus, especially solutions that don't result in families going bankrupt and thousands being added to the unemployment lines," Vos said.

Vos and Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald sent a letter to Palm Wednesday arguing that the latest emergency order, which limits capacity at bars, restaurants and stores to 25% capacity, is "unenforceable."

Evers' spokeswoman Britt Cudaback answered, "On their 175th day of inaction, Republicans chose to send a letter. That says everything Wisconsinites need to know about Republicans' priorities during this pandemic."

Work began in spring to create the overflow facility for coronavirus patients at the Wisconsin State Fair Exposition Center. The field hospital, which cost more than \$15 million to construct, was built in about 10 days in early April by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers when the pandemic was ravaging New York City and hospitals feared they would be overwhelmed by patients.

The alternate care facility was one of more than 30 set up throughout the country, but is one of only a few that has actually been needed.

## Hospitals reaching capacity

ThedaCare so far has not had to transfer any patients to other hospital systems, Andrabi said, but it is prepared to send people to the field hospital in Milwaukee when it opens next week.

Between 200 and 250 ThedaCare staff are not at work due to illness or quarantine, Andrabi said. Most of those infections are attributed to community spread, not something they've caught while at work in the hospital.

"If this is not a crisis, I don't know what a crisis looks like," Andrabi said.

And at Bellin Hospital in Green Bay, the volume of patients began steadily growing after Labor Day and has not let up, said Brad Burmeister, a physician in the emergency department. Bellin has been able to handle the demand without sending patients to other hospitals, he said, but that likely won't be true if the volume of new cases doesn't subside.

"Our goal has been to deliver care locally rather than have to send patients to Milwaukee or other places," said Burmeister. "But that won't happen if we continue to see numbers double and triple."

He said Bellin has several times been near capacity in recent weeks, meaning some non-COVID patients have spent time on gurneys in hallways as staff worked to clear occasional backlogs of patients.

*Alison Dirr of the Journal Sentinel and Madeline Heim and Doug Schneider of USA Today Network-Wisconsin contributed to this report.*

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