

Governor sends Idaho back to Stage 2

Today, Governor Little took two steps to help slow the spread and offer relief to healthcare workers who continue to face the ramifications of escalating COVID-19 cases.

Governor Little continued to stress his priority to protect healthcare workers, preserve hospital capacity, and keep schools and businesses open. Based on the hospitalization data, the staffing difficulties hospitals are experiencing, the shortage of staffed beds available across the state and region, and the reality that care rationing may begin in the coming weeks, Governor Little declared, "more must be done."

In response, he is reverting Idaho back to a "modified Stage 2" of the Idaho Rebounds Plan. This statewide public health orders means:

- Social gatherings of more than 10 people, indoors or out, are prohibited. The exceptions are religious or political expressions. School sports can continue with no more than 10 spectators.
- Those who can, should telework and those at risk should self-isolate.
- Masks are still required at long term care facilities.
- Restaurants, bars and nightclubs may remain open at their current reduced capacity, but patrons must remain seated.
- Schools can continue in-person teaching while following all safety protocols. Governor Little noted that the data shows that spread is not happening through classroom learning which continues to be safe for working and learning; rather, it's the ancillary gatherings, like sports, where transmission is prevalent.

The Governor's second action today is the mobilization of 100 members of the Idaho National Guard to help address unsustainable stresses in the healthcare system. Soldiers will focus on expanding capacity at hospitals and long-term care facilities. The Guard can be made available to help in healthcare settings by providing mobile testing and screening support, facility decontamination, or other missions as requested.

Idaho National Guard Adjutant General Mike Garshak noted that those soldiers being activated will not be those currently working in healthcare; rather, they will tap those who can assist in support activities.

Governor Little noted that "doctors and nurses are overworked and burned out" as the system is stretched thin with the overload of patients and that the Guard is a resource that may help alleviate some areas of stress; however, it is up to all Idahoans to be responsible to make sure that healthcare capacity is available for COVID patients as well as those with other emergent issues.

He invited Emilia Cortez, a former St. Luke's patient who delivered her newborn then was separated from her baby for weeks while being cared for in the ICU. Emilia, who has to use supplemental oxygen regularly, shared her experience and on-going struggles to help other young adults understand that they can have dire consequences if they become infected.

Rachel Thain, one of Emilia's respiratory therapist, shared the perspective of many clinical staff in how challenging it will be to not be able to care for Idahoans when they need it most. She begged Idahoans to wear their masks. "Feelings are not facts," she noted, when explaining why masks work and how they need to be worn by all.

Hospital snapshots on capacity challenges

Idaho's healthcare workers continue to meet the healthcare needs of their communities but the surge in hospitalized patients is taxing the system across the entire state. With the looming certainty that some care rationing may take place in the coming weeks if case counts don't slow, Idahoans may see longer emergency department wait times, transfers to other facilities, and other delays in care.

A few of the most recent challenges hospitals are experiencing this week:

- Longstanding workforce shortages are becoming an even bigger hurdles with fewer resources to access. Traveling nurses, which used to take days to arrange, are taking weeks to bring on board in some areas, with costs doubling or tripling, if any are even available.
- Transfers to other hospitals within the state are becoming more difficult and are taking longer to organize – from 15-20 minutes to hours.
- St. Luke's has begun canceling elective cases requiring an overnight stay at their larger facilities and will stop scheduling certain elective procedures that can be delayed for 90 days or more.
- For the hospitals in Southeastern Idaho, looking to partners in Utah to transfer patients is becoming less of an option and will likely not be possible in the coming days.
- Kootenai Health had to close its day care center for nearly two weeks, causing 140 employees to find alternative care or stay home with their children.
- Consistently, hospitals are reporting at least 3-5% of their workforce out each day, with many running at a higher rate. Hospitals are reporting increases of employees ill with COVID (community-acquired) or quarantining, having to care for children who can't be in school, or due to family members who are ill.
- Diversions have been forced on hospitals in several areas of the state, most lasting 12 hours or less at this point.
- Fatigue is causing some healthcare workers to decline requests for overtime or double shifts.

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