

White House says Texas has ‘full resurgence’ of COVID-19 and must do more to slow spread

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Latest in a series of reports previously kept under wraps sends strong warning.



Giana Towns helps a client fill out their information before getting a COVID-19 swab test at Project Unity's free testing site at Glendale Shopping Center, Friday, Nov. 13, 2020, in Dallas. The group is setting up daily testing sites at different locations daily. (Vernon Bryant//The Dallas Morning News via AP) (Vernon Bryant)

AUSTIN — The White House, pointing to a “full resurgence” of COVID-19 in Texas, says the state must do more to stop the virus’ spread.

Guidance issued last week calls on Texas to proactively test teachers, hospital staff and other community members to search for silent spreaders, and to significantly reduce the number of people allowed to gather indoors.

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“The silent community spread that precedes and continues to drive these surges can only be identified and interrupted through proactive, focused testing,” said the White House report issued Nov. 22. “This must be combined with significant behavior change of all Americans.”

The recommendations, made before the Thanksgiving holiday, were made public Monday by the Center for Public Integrity.

The White House’s coronavirus task force has been producing detailed reports for all 50 states since June. Each report contains county-level statistics about the virus’ spread, as well as recommendations tailored to each state. But the reports are not widely available, making it difficult to evaluate if certain states have followed the guidelines.

On Monday, Gov. Greg Abbott declined to answer questions about the report’s recommendations. Instead, spokeswoman Renae Eze said the state is sending resources and medication to hard-hit areas and suggested local authorities need to do more to enforce occupancy limits and mask orders.

As winter approaches, COVID-19 cases are soaring nationwide. While the latest report put Texas in the “red zone” for its high level of coronavirus cases, much of the country is worse off. The report ranked Texas 34th for cases per capita.

Still, the report declares that Texas has seen an “ever rising, unsustainable increase in hospitalizations” and that “mitigation efforts must intensify.”

It suggests the state significantly reduce capacity or close public spaces where masking is not possible.



Texas Gov. Greg Abbott rejects sterner measures against COVID-19 as single-day cases hit new record

With at least six hospital regions in Texas burdened by worrisome loads of coronavirus patients, Gov. Greg Abbott on Thursday traveled to one such area – Lubbock – to hail the federal government’s distribution of a new antibody treatment.

By Robert T. Garrett

Abbott resisted some calls to tighten up COVID-19 restrictions ahead of Thanksgiving, as public health experts warned cases could surge with people traveling to visit family.

Under his current order, many businesses in Texas, such as restaurants, bowling alleys and movie theaters, are open at 75% of capacity. Regions must scale back when at least 15% of hospital beds are taken up by COVID-19 patients for seven days straight.

Six areas over the limit

Six have already hit the trigger, forcing restaurants and certain other businesses to limit capacity to 50%. They include counties from the Panhandle to El Paso, in addition to the areas around Waco and Laredo. Seven other regions, including one that covers Dallas and Fort Worth, have met the hospitalization threshold for several days in a row, but have not reached the one-week mark.

If hospitalizations continue to rise, the state may need to consider other action, said David Lakey, vice chancellor for health affairs and chief medical officer at the University of Texas System.

“If they go up significantly, they will need to strongly consider backing off on some of the businesses that are open.” he said.

Since transmission is so widespread, it is often not possible to pinpoint where someone catches the virus.

“As has been seen nationally, we’ve heard reports from local jurisdictions throughout the pandemic that a significant amount of spread is being traced to smaller gatherings of family and friends,” Department of State Health Services spokesman Chris Van Deusen said.

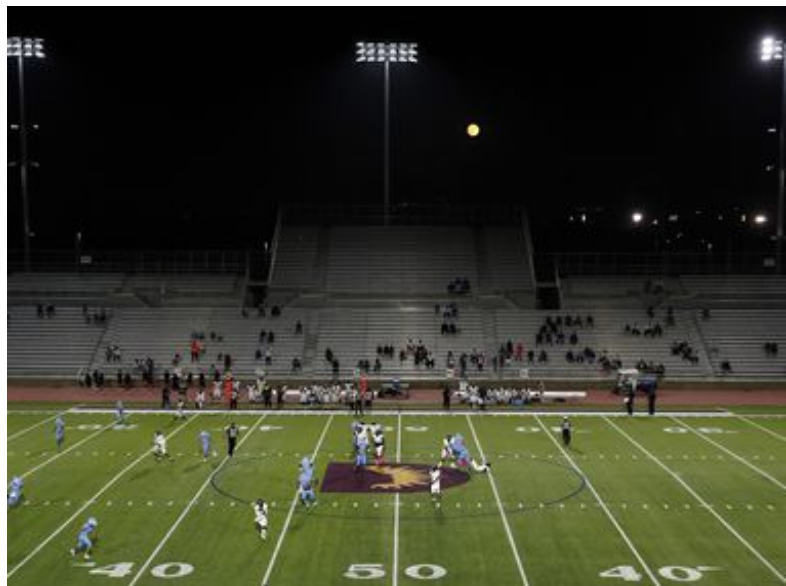
On Monday, the state health department reported that 8,900 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 in Texas. When the state first reached that level in July, Abbott had already issued a statewide mask order that is still in place and temporarily closed bars.

Dallas County is at its highest rate of infection since the pandemic began, with 53 new daily cases per 100,000 residents. Cases are continuing to appear in the community at large, but also in long-term care facilities, homeless shelters, group homes and halfway houses, Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins said in a statement Monday.

More testing, White House says

Even though Texas has ramped up its testing capacity dramatically since the start of the epidemic, the White House report calls for more proactive community testing to search for asymptomatic spreaders.

Education



Dallas ISD plans to start testing student athletes for COVID-19

By Jesus Jimenez

Some universities, correctional facilities and nursing homes have already been conducting

including Dallas ISD, according to the Texas Education Agency.

The report recommends testing groups representative of the community, such as teachers, community college students, county workers, staff in crowded settings, all hospital personnel and large private sector employers. It also suggests the state begin planning for weekly testing of all college students once they return to campus this winter.

While widespread testing can be helpful, it's also voluntary, so some people may not participate because a positive result and ensuing quarantine could cost them their jobs, Lakey said.

“Testing like that is helpful,” he said, “but it can’t take the place of these other community mitigation strategies.”

While some states have released the White House task force reports to the public, Texas has not.

This summer, the White House told *The Dallas Morning News* it couldn't release the reports and suggested asking Abbott. When *The News* asked Abbott, his office said it needed to check with the White House.

After not hearing back from the White House for several months, only this week did the governor's office say it would begin releasing the reports.

As such, it's still unclear what the White House task force has been recommending for Texas for most of the late summer and fall.

Allie Morris, Austin Bureau Correspondent . Allie has covered Texas politics for two years and written about everything from tax policy to child protection. She previously worked for the San Antonio Express-News and in New Hampshire, as the statehouse reporter for the Concord Monitor.

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