

Texas, Florida roll back reopening as White House revives virus task force

June 26 2020



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Texas and Florida ordered bars to stop serving alcohol on site Friday amid a record-breaking surge in COVID-19 cases in both states, as the White House coronavirus task force was set to hold its first public

briefing in almost two months.

The two populous southern states, home to some 50 million people, were spared the worst of the outbreak in spring but are now being struck hard.

The United States, already the hardest-hit country in the world with close to 125,000 deaths, never fully emerged from its first wave. Following a weeks-long plateau, new cases are once again back to where they were in April.

"At this time, it is clear that the rise in cases is largely driven by certain types of activities, including Texans congregating in bars," said Texas Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican ally of President Donald Trump.

As a result, bars will be required to close but may continue providing delivery and take-out services. Other measures include that restaurants can remain open with 50 percent capacity indoors, and outdoor gatherings of 100 people or more require local government approval.

Texas was among the most aggressive states in reopening in early June after months of lockdown. But the strategy has backfired: the state saw a record of 5,596 new coronavirus cases Thursday, a major jump from just 10 days ago, when the state had only 1,254 new cases in a day.

Lina Hidalgo, the chief executive of Harris County, the most populous in Texas which includes the city of Houston, issued a stay-at-home advisory and raised the threat level to "severe" or Level 1.

"This pandemic is like an invisible hurricane," Hidalgo said. "This is a serious situation. The outbreaks are worsening."

Hidalgo, who is affiliated with the Democratic party, does not have the authority to make the guidance mandatory.

Florida meanwhile reported a record breaking 8,942 new cases of COVID-19 Friday, as well as 39 new deaths and 212 additional hospitalizations.

"Effective immediately, the Department of Business and Professional Regulation is suspending on premises consumption of alcohol at bars statewide," the Florida government department tweeted Friday.

Task force back

Underscoring the severity of the situation, the White House [coronavirus](#) task force reconvened Friday, where it may unveil a new strategy of testing groups of people together.

In an interview with The Washington Post, key member Anthony Fauci said health officials were in "intense discussions" to carry out "pool testing," which would let officials test more people with fewer resources.

This may involve pooling samples from 20 individuals and testing them as one. If all are negative, researchers can move to the next pool. But if it's positive, then each individual in the pool gets tested.

Fauci told the Post discussions had reached this point because "Something's not working."

The task force, which is headed by Vice President Mike Pence, was a nightly fixture during the early part of the pandemic.

Tens of millions of viewers watched as President Donald Trump spoke from the podium—often endorsing the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine as treatment for COVID-19, despite a lack of rigorous studies in its favor.

At one point, he mused that scientists might be able to leverage disinfectant, or sunlight, for use inside the human body—a suggestion that is not grounded in fact and triggered widespread ridicule.

The briefings also boosted the public reputation of Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, whose scientific straight talk and advice provided a measure of reassurance to the public.

But the body has not held a public meeting since late April, as Trump has tried to draw a line under the pandemic, repeatedly declaring it "over" as he eyes the election in November.

Outbreak 'getting younger'

The US has seen new case numbers higher than 30,000 for the past several days—comparable to the earlier peak in April.

The death rate has not returned to earlier levels.

Part of this may be because it takes three to four weeks for the most sick individuals to die—but experts also think it's because a higher proportion of younger people are getting infected.

"Today we're seeing more viruses in younger individuals, fewer of those individuals are requiring hospitalizations and having a fatal outcome," Robert Redfield, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) told reporters Thursday.

Members of the [task force](#)—particularly Pence—will be closely watched to see whether or not they are wearing masks, when the briefing takes place at the Health and Human Services Department at 12:30 pm (1630 GMT).

Some on the US right wing have sought to cast face coverings as an assault on individual liberty and a liberal conspiracy to stoke fear.

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Citation: Texas, Florida roll back reopening as White House revives virus task force (2020, June 26) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-texas-florida-reopening-white-house.html>

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