

# Hospitalization data flawed in Missouri, perhaps elsewhere

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In this April 16, 2020 file photo, registered medical assistant Elaine Lomax handles a nasal swab specimen after it was collected at a drive-thru COVID-19 testing site in St. Louis. With the number of coronavirus patients requiring hospitalization rising at alarming levels, Missouri and perhaps at least a handful of other states are unable to post accurate data on COVID-19 dashboards because of a flaw in the federal reporting system. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson File)

With the number of coronavirus patients requiring hospitalization rising at alarming levels, Missouri and perhaps a handful of other states are unable to post accurate data on COVID-19 dashboards because of a flaw in the federal reporting system.

Since Tuesday, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Service's coronavirus dashboard has posted a message that the total number of patients hospitalized for COVID-19 has been underreported since Oct. 17. The note blamed "challenges entering data" to the portal used by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for collecting daily hospitalizations around the country.

It wasn't immediately clear on Friday how many states are impacted since some states rely on their own hospitalization counts, not HHS data collection. HHS did not immediately respond to phone and email messages seeking comment.

But The COVID Tracking Project [said in a blog post](#) that it has "identified five other states with anomalies in their hospitalization figures" that could be tied to the HHS reporting problem.

The project noted that the number of reported intensive care unit patients in Kansas had decreased from 80 to one without explanation. It said Wisconsin's hospitalization figures stayed unexpectedly flat while other indicators worsened. And it said Georgia, Alabama, and Florida reported only partial updates to hospitalization data.

Kansas Department of Health and Environment spokeswoman Kristi Zears confirmed that the "ICU admission data displayed on our website is not current. We did post a notice on our dashboard today to convey that as well. We anticipate the issue will be resolved for our Monday update."

A spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services said the state's reporting was accurate, with the number of hospitalizations holding steady for one day, Wednesday, before rising again on Thursday. A Georgia Department of Public Health spokeswoman said the department was unaware of any problems with its data. Health department representatives in the other states mentioned in the blog didn't immediately respond to Associated Press requests for comment.

In Missouri, the loss of accurate hospitalization data comes as confirmed cases continue to rise. On Friday, Missouri reported 1,811 new cases of COVID-19, and 31 additional deaths. Since the onset of the pandemic, Missouri has cited 164,534 confirmed cases and 2,688 deaths.

Missouri also has seen a steady rise in COVID-19 hospitalizations since September. The state reached record levels of hospitalizations several times earlier this month, with every region except St. Louis seeing record or near-record spikes. Since July 7, when 375 people were hospitalized statewide, that number has nearly quadrupled to a peak of 1,465 hospitalizations on Oct. 14.

The problem is especially worrisome in rural areas, where some hospitals are nearing capacity. Others are using makeshift buildings or previously vacant hospital wings to serve overflow patients. Some are simply redirecting people to larger hospitals.

State health department spokeswoman Lisa Cox said the federal hospital reporting system, known as TeleTracking, went down. "As a result they experienced underreporting—so hospitalization numbers were lower than they should've been," Cox said in an email.

Missouri Hospital Association Senior Vice President Mary Becker said HHS recently implemented changes; some measures were removed from the portal, others were added or renamed. Some reporting hospitals were

able to report using the new measures, but others were not, and as a result, the system crashed, she said.

"This change is impacting hospitals across the country," Becker said in an email. "Some states collect the data directly and may not yet be introducing the new measures to their processes. Missouri hospitals use TeleTracking and did not have control over the introduction of the changes to the template."

The last day with accurate data, Oct. 16, showed 1,439 people hospitalized in Missouri, down slightly from the record of 1,465 set two days earlier.

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