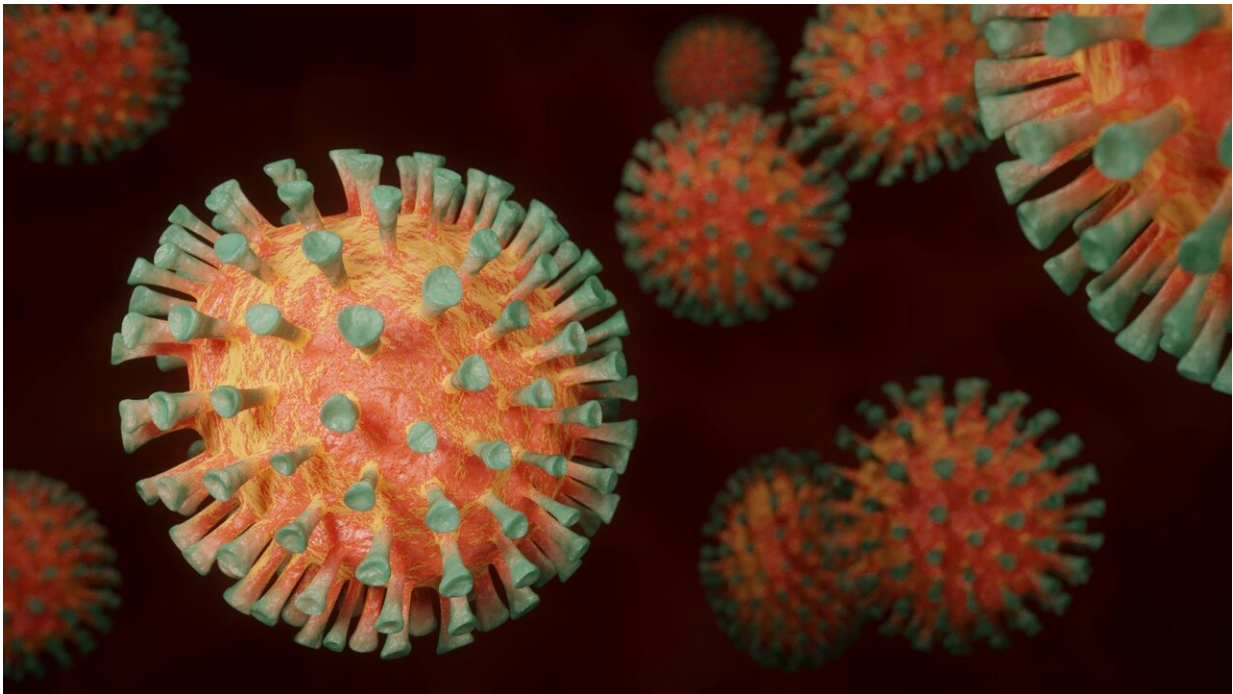


Officials prepare to faceoff over masks as Kansas cases rise (Update)

October 22 2020, by Heather Hollingsworth



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Kansas' coronavirus case count continued to climb, even as one GOP lawmaker pushed back against Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly's call for a statewide mask mandate.

"I've stated all along, and still believe, a one-size-fits-all COVID solution doesn't work for our diverse state," Kansas Senate President Susan

Wagle, a Wichita Republican, said Thursday in a written statement. "Local leaders have done a great job in dictating local responses after public hearings and discussions with their constituents."

More than 90 of the state's 105 counties have opted out of the current mask order. That's why Kelly said Wednesday that she plans to speak with House and Senate leadership to work toward a bipartisan mask requirement with more teeth.

Her announcement came as the seven-day rolling average of the positivity rate in Kansas rose from 15.04% on Oct. 7 to 20.64% on Wednesday, according to data from The COVID Tracking Project. The seven-day average for new cases also set another record of 757 on Wednesday. And from Monday to Wednesday, the state also added 80 more COVID-19-related deaths, most of them stemming from a review of death certificates, bringing the state's fatality toll to 952.

"Yes, Kansas has been experiencing an increase in cases recently, specifically in the rural parts of our state," said Kristi Zears, a spokeswoman for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, in an email. "It's more important now than ever to wear masks, continue to practice social distancing, stay home when sick and avoid large groups of people."

But many lawmakers are resistant to imposing statewide restrictions, wanting the decisions left to local officials. Kelly said during a news conference that there would be legislative challenges but that the research was clear: masks work.

"People don't have time for us to wait around for an election to be over with," Kelly said. "We need to start these conversations. We need to come to a resolution as soon as we can. We know we have a problem, and that's why we need a solution."

Even in Wichita, the state's largest city, restrictions have been weakened. An ordinance there requiring protective face masks was quietly allowed to expire by the City Council this week. That means control over masks now shifts to Sedgwick County. The county commission has twice rejected mask orders from Kelly, though orders from county health officer have been allowed to stay in place.

But police cannot write tickets for violations of the county's public health order, as they could under the city's stronger ordinance. The county version can only be enforced through the lengthy procedure of filing a civil lawsuit and obtaining a court order, [The Wichita Eagle reports](#).

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