

Cases surge in new COVID hot spots of Michigan, Minnesota

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Hospitals in Michigan and Minnesota on Tuesday reported a wave of COVID-19 patients not seen in months as beds were filled with unvaccinated people and health care leaders warned that staff were being

worn down by yet another surge.

Michigan had slightly more than 3,000 COVID-19 patients in hospitals this week, the first time it had crossed that threshold since spring, while nearly all hospital beds were occupied in Minnesota. Both held the unflattering rank of national virus hotspots.

It "should be alarming to all of us," Bob Riney, [chief operating officer](#) at Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, said of the hospital crush.

The overall outlook has improved significantly in recent weeks in the U.S., with coronavirus hospitalizations standing at about 40,000, compared with more than 90,000 at the peak of the delta surge. Virus spread has slowed in the South to the point that more locations are doing away with mask restrictions.

But pockets of the country are seeing surges, including the Northeast, Rockies and Upper Midwest.

Henry Ford Health and Spectrum Health across the state in Grand Rapids, Michigan, together reported 700 COVID-19 patients in their hospitals, the majority of whom were not vaccinated. Positive test rates were running above 20%.

Michigan had the country's highest seven-day COVID-19 case rate at 503 per 100,000 people, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Minnesota was No. 2 at 490.

"All of us had hoped that we'd be in a very different place as we approach this Thanksgiving season. But we really are not," Riney said.

When he listens to front-line staff, Riney said they are disheartened to see more COVID-19 cases, especially when vaccines are available.

"These are the women and men that the community celebrated last year," he said. "Parades were held in their honor. They were touted as the heroes they are. ... They haven't gotten a break."

In Minnesota, Health Commissioner Jan Malcolm said she's ready to expand access to the [booster vaccine](#) by the end of the week if the federal government doesn't act first.

An influential U.S. advisory panel will discuss expanding eligibility booster shots to all adults Friday, a move that could make the shots available nationwide as early as this weekend. Pfizer asked U.S. regulators last week to allow boosters of its COVID-19 vaccine for anyone 18 or older. The Food and Drug Administration is expected to sign off on Pfizer's application before the advisory panel meets Friday. The final step—the CDC's official recommendation—could come soon after the meeting.

"As we now head indoors for the winter and gather for the holidays, this booster protection is particularly important and timely," Malcolm said.

Meanwhile, a growing number of Americans are getting boosters. Arkansas this week joined California, Colorado, West Virginia and New Mexico in offering them to anyone 18 or older instead of only giving them to people at a greater risk for COVID-19 or age 65 and up.

Elsewhere, some communities in the South were easing virus restrictions as a result of high vaccination rates and low numbers of positive tests.

Louisiana State University dropped an indoor mask order on campus. More than eight out of every 10 students and 79% of staff are vaccinated against COVID-19.

"We are moving forward with confidence but with caution," President

William Tate said.

Masks and social distancing now are optional in Florida courthouses. Chief Justice Charles Canady noted that nearly 70% of eligible Florida residents were fully vaccinated and the rate of new COVID-19 cases had dropped.

In Orange County, Florida, which includes Orlando, county employees are no longer required to wear masks indoors, although masks still are recommended. Local virus transmission risk was downgraded to moderate.

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