

'Like Wildfire': Covid cases skyrocket on Marshall Islands

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A health disaster has been declared on the Marshall Islands after the fast-

spreading COVID variant Omicron infected more than a tenth of residents in the capital Majuro in one week.

Since a handful of positive community cases were confirmed on August 8, the numbers have skyrocketed to 2,800 in a city of 22,500.

"We're gearing up for the hardest part of the outbreak right now in Majuro," Health Secretary Jack Niedenthal said Monday.

Thanks to strict quarantine rules, the Marshalls Islands was one of the last countries to stay COVID-free.

"The good thing about having all these other countries go before us is we really understand epidemiologically how this variant of the virus spreads: like wildfire," Niedenthal added.

On Friday, the Marshalls' President David Kabua signed a "State of Health Disaster" to give the government access to emergency funding.

So far, there have been 3,000 positive cases in a population of around 42,000 across the islands and atolls that comprise the Marshalls.

Niedenthal warned the outbreak was continuing "to gain strength" in Majuro, as the number of cases doubled from Saturday to Sunday.

"About 75 percent of the people we test are positive, which is an incredibly high rate," he added

So far, three deaths have been reported.

Three "Alternative Care Sites" set up in Majuro have been swamped by people seeking treatment for symptoms and testing.

Local health officials initially struggled to cope with demand as thousands of islanders clamoured for help even as 200 doctors and nurses across the country tested positive for COVID.

The outbreak has since spread from the capital to Ebeye, the densely populated community next door to the US military's Reagan Test Site at Kwajalein Atoll.

The tiny island, home to about 1,000 people, would likely see a surge in cases, Niedenthal warned Monday. "They are about a week behind Majuro," he said.

Domestic flights by national carrier Air Marshall Islands and travel by government ships to remote islands have been suspended since last Tuesday in an effort to contain the spread.

A special flight intended to take a [health](#) team to some of the country's [remote islands](#) was grounded Sunday as all Air Marshall pilots had reportedly tested positive.

A relaxing of the quarantine rules in recent weeks coupled with unprecedented numbers of people coming in through the managed quarantine process is the outbreak's suspected cause.

The government previously announced plans to open its borders and drop quarantine on arrival requirements from October 1.

The US-based Centers for Disease Control and other agencies are set to send support teams this week.

Niedenthal described the extra help as "boots-on-the-ground medical support professionals" who will be sent to support [local authorities](#) after being tested on arrival.

"As a country, we have moved from prevention to mitigation because we are now fighting this disease," he said.

"The days of quarantine upon arrival are now over."

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