

Cuomo announces winter plan to combat COVID-19 surge

Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Monday announced New York's plan for combating COVID-19 this winter. His office said that, over the past week, Cuomo and the state's COVID task force has worked in consultation with global public health experts, local governments and other stakeholders. This was done to ensure the plan builds off the lessons learned during the past nine months to anticipate and prepare for an expected increase in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations over the holiday season.

Specifically, the winter plan consists of five targeted strategies focused on mitigating the spread of the virus and bolstering New York state hospital preparedness.

"While the holiday season often brings joy to many, the increase in social activity and mobility will also bring an increase of viral transmission. We understand the cause and effect, and the effect is dramatic," Cuomo said. "We must adapt to this reality and have a plan in place that specifically addresses the challenges that come with it. We've been through the worst and, while we're not done yet, we are moving forward with the lessons we learned in the spring to come through this together."

•Strategy 1 – Continue and Strengthen New York's Targeted Micro-Cluster Strategy while Managing Hospital Capacity to Enhance and Equalize Care

Cuomo's office said that, since the governor first launched New York's micro-cluster strategy in mid-October, it has proved effective in identifying targeted areas with high infection rates and implementing additional restrictions to reduce viral spread in the micro-cluster area. This approach has allowed state and local health officials to target resources, has encouraged community members to take greater action to reduce viral spread, and helped prevent the need for larger, regional shutdowns that impact all aspects of life and the economy.

Under New York's winter COVID-19 plan, this strategy will be strengthened through the utilization of additional, hospital-related metrics to provide a clearer picture of where a particular zone stands in the fight against the coronavirus and how each neighborhood, municipality and other geographic area contributes to daily hospital admissions due to COVID-19. Under this improved strategy, the New York State Department of Health will include factors such as regional hospital bed capacity, ICU capacity, staffing ratios, and daily hospital admissions as part of the analysis and metrics used to determine which geographic areas qualify as micro-cluster zones. In addition to the three existing micro-cluster zone levels ("yellow precautionary," "orange warning" and "red"), New York will also add a new "emergency stop" level, which will effectively put that area under the "New York State on PAUSE" guidelines, if needed to preserve hospital capacity. Hospital metrics associated with these zones will be identified in the next week to 10 days, once data from the Thanksgiving holiday is received and analyzed.

Additionally, the Department of Health has begun to initiate emergency hospital measures to pre-

pare the state's hospital system for an expected surge in new admissions over the upcoming weeks. Specifically, these measures include:

√ Hospital systems must begin to identify retired nurses and doctors to bolster staff;

√ Hospital systems in Erie County must suspend elective surgeries to create new bed capacity for COVID patients;

√ Hospital systems must begin balancing patient loads across their individual hospital facilities;

√ Prepare plans to utilize emergency field hospitals;

√ Prepare plans to increase hospital bed capacity by 50%;

√ Prepare plans to implement statewide "surge and flex" operations (similar to load balancing, but patient shifts would occur across all hospital systems, as opposed to within individual hospital systems)

√ Prepare plans to staff emergency field hospitals; and

√ Confirm availability of resources in existing stockpiles.

The Department of Health will also be launching a new, statewide hospital metric tracking system.

2 – Increase and Balance Testing Resources and Availability

Under the winter plan, New York state will take steps to increase the amount of testing available statewide, but do so in a way that ensures distribution is balanced with testing sufficient across different segments of the population, including:

√ Health care workers;

√ Nursing homes;

√ Schools;

√ Essential workers;

√ Business professionals;

√ Personal services testing; and

√ General population, returning students and travelers, etc.

3 – Keep Schools Open Safely

One of the most critical aspects of managing the COVID-19 pandemic for governments and parents alike, the governor's office said, has been answering the question of how and when schools should remain open: "On that point, experts from around the globe have determined that, as long as a school's infection rate is under control and remains under the infection rate of the community at large, schools should remain open – particularly for students in K-8. Not only does school provide parents with support in terms of child care, it provides a regularity to life, which has been missing for so many children throughout this pandemic."

Under New York's winter plan, efforts will be focused on keeping K-8 and special education schools

are kept open as long as it can be done safely. The first step will be to establish sustainable, ongoing testing in schools so that they can continue operating in the long term. As part of this, schools located in "orange" and "red" micro-cluster zones will be required to conduct weekly testing. Schools in "orange zones" will be required to test 20% of in person students, faculty and staff over the course of a month, while schools in "red zones" will be required to test 30% of in person students, faculty and staff over a month. Pool testing will be allowed as well.

These protocols represent the minimum standard required for schools to stay open. The state may adjust requirements for specific districts based on any special circumstances that may arise. While local districts are able to close at levels under the state's mandatory closure rule, they are urged to keep K-8 schools open whenever it is safe.

4 – Prevent Viral Spread from Small Gatherings

Small gatherings have now been identified as the No. 1 spreader of COVID-19, with at least 65% of all cases coming from these settings.

The governor's office said, "Now that we are in holiday season, behavioral shifts must be observed by New Yorkers to mitigate the spread. Sixteen states, including New York, have already instituted gathering limits of less than 10 people, with Kentucky recently moving to gathering limits to 8 or less. While government's ability to monitor small gatherings is limited, public education on the safety concerns of small gatherings is crucial. As New York state did with public campaigns urging mask compliance, New York state will be launching a public education campaign to highlight how small gatherings can lead to the spread of COVID-19 in the community."

5 – Operationalize an Equitable and Safe Vaccination Program

While a vaccine is expected to be released in the coming weeks, it will be months before a critical mass of available vaccinations for the general public will be available. As the state builds its plan to distribute vaccinations, it will be founded on three main pillars:

√ Fairness;

√ Equity; and

√ Safety.

The governor's office said, "These pillars, as well as outreach to the Black and brown communities with poor health outcomes who have been hit hardest by the pandemic, are critical to ensuring a fair distribution of the vaccine."

New York to receive initial delivery of COVID-19 vaccine doses for 170,000

State expects to receive vaccines Dec. 15 if all safety and efficacy approvals are granted

New York expects to receive additional vaccine allocations from Pfizer and Moderna this month

Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Wednesday announced New York state will receive an initial delivery of enough COVID-19 vaccine doses for 170,000 residents. If all safety and efficacy approvals are granted by the federal government, the state expects to receive the vaccines – which were created by Pfizer – on Dec. 15. New York expects additional allocations of vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna later this month.

"As we continue to move through the holiday season, the good news is that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, but unfortunately it is still a ways away and we are now faced with a set of challenges to overcome

before we get there. Not only is the number of COVID-19 cases rising virtually everywhere, but they are stemming from a new source, with nearly 70% of cases being traced back to households and private gatherings," Cuomo said. "The federal government has also informed us that New York will be getting its first 170,000 doses of the vaccine in the coming weeks, and while that is certainly welcomed news, the federal vaccination plan not only overlooks the Black, brown and poor communities, but its data sharing provisions will dissuade the undocumented community from getting a vaccination. Winning the war against COVID has to be an inclusive process and only by everyone working together will we be successful. While we continue to fight to make the federal plan more inclusive, effective and fair, New Yorkers need to do their part to help limit the spread."

N-W Kiwanis raffle postponed

The Kiwanis Club of Niagara-Wheatfield's raffle, scheduled for Saturday, Dec. 5, has been postponed until further notice.

"Due to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases, it was in the club's best interest to protect the health and wellbeing of its members and the community to reschedule the raffle at a later date," said Danny Maerten, lieutenant governor of the Niagara Frontier North Kiwanis Division.

NF Council cancels community meeting

The Niagara Falls City Council announced community meeting, scheduled for 6 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 16, at John Duke Senior Center, has been canceled.

"With COVID news unfortunately worsening, the council feels – out of an abundance of caution – that this event should be canceled," Chairman Chris

Voccio said.

The elected leaders had scheduled four of these events in 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in all but one of them being canceled.

Memorial testing event at John Duke Center

Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center will hold a COVID-19 testing event from 1-4 p.m. Monday, Dec. 7, at the John Duke Senior Center, 1201 Hyde Park Blvd., Niagara Falls.

Persons wanting to be tested must have a prescription from their primary care provider. Prescriptions are issued only to people who have been in contact with a COVID-19-infected person or who have symptoms.

As free testing will not be available, persons to be tested should bring their insurance card along with their prescription. Persons who have BlueCross BlueShield coverage are for this event.

For information, or to request an appointment, call 278-4496.



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