

After handful of tests, West Virginia officials claim zero coronavirus cases

By Naomi Spencer
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As the coronavirus spreads throughout the United States, West Virginia is the last state to claim zero cases of the infection. Far from being a source of good news, the lack of positive diagnoses reflects an almost nonexistent safety net for the state's largely low-income population and portends a public health disaster.

Operating on barebones funding, the state Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) is moving at a snail's pace to track the virus. As of March 14, officials at the DHHR said only 39 people statewide had been tested for COVID-19 through its public health lab. Of those, 38 came back negative, with one result pending.

Although testing for the coronavirus has expanded through some hospitals and commercial laboratories across the state, the DHHR is only reporting results processed in its lab facility.

The implications of delayed testing and mitigation measures are life-threatening to the population. At 51 percent, West Virginia has the highest share of adults of any state in the country that are likely to develop serious complications from Covid-19 because of their age or poor health.

A Kaiser Family Foundation policy brief released March 13 found 734,590 West Virginians age 18 and older are high risk for serious illness if they contract coronavirus. Of those, 233,150 adults are under the age of 60 with heart disease, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or diabetes.

In nearly every respect, the state ranks near the bottom in health, life expectancy, mortality rates, drug addiction and other measures of individual and social well-being. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data indicates West Virginia has the highest death rate from diabetes and among the highest rates of death in

the country for respiratory disease including black lung, cancer and heart disease.

Kaiser Family Foundation senior vice president Dr. Jennifer Kates commented to the *New York Times* that, notwithstanding the officially reported absence of the virus in the state, widespread ill health put West Virginia in danger of a greater disaster. "The factor that's driving West Virginia is the share of adults under 60 who have these underlying conditions," Dr. Kates said. "That's the factor that puts West Virginia over the top."

Moreover, the sustained impact of the opioid crisis has left many children orphaned to be raised by grandparents. In some counties, more than 50 percent of public school students are living with their grandparents, according to the state's "Healthy Grandfamilies" program. These circumstances increase the likelihood that children exposed to the coronavirus at school will transmit it to their vulnerable older relatives at home.

Until Friday, March 13, public schools continued to operate. Republican Governor Jim Justice announced via a press conference that schools would close until March 27, and state employees would not be attending large meetings or traveling.

Late on Sunday, Charleston Mayor Amy Shuler Goodwin declared a state of emergency in the capital city to provide the state's Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management additional authority to direct city operations. However, no local businesses, including the centrally located city mall with its popular public food court, will be closed.

The decisions are too little, too late, but absurdly defended by the political establishment as preparations that put the state ahead of the pandemic. In his typically inept and rambling manner, Governor Jim Justice told

the press March 13, “Where we are is just plain simply this: We’ve got a monster that’s looming. There’s times in life where you got to stare down the monster. That’s all there is to it.”

A review of any number of previous “monsters” West Virginia has faced over the past decade would reveal the real balance of powers. Among the monsters allowed to run rampant through the population: the opioid crisis, with the highest fatal overdose rate in the nation, and its consequent clusters of hepatitis and HIV—many in Charleston where the city government ordered closed a needle exchange program operating across from the mall and Civic Center.

Another “monster” permitted free rein in the state has been the impact of pollution and disasters triggered by corporate negligence and government deregulation.

In 2014, a chemical spill into the Elk River near Charleston left 300,000 people without safe drinking water. Six years later, nearly two-thirds of all counties in West Virginia have among the worst water quality in the US. Incidents of cancer and other diseases are directly associated with the pollution.

Nearly four years after flash flooding devastated the state, barely any of the 5,500 residents whose homes were damaged or destroyed have been made whole. Out of hundreds of applicants to the \$149,875,000 recovery fund program, only 51 houses have been completed. Thousands of children are still attending school in temporary trailers near the sites of many of the 67 damaged school buildings. “There is currently no timeline for when all the schools will be rebuilt,” the most recent West Virginia Disaster Recovery Office performance report states.

Meanwhile, the billionaire Governor Justice—the wealthiest man in the state and personal friend of President Donald Trump—has used millions of dollars in emergency flood funding to renovate his sprawling Greenbrier Resort and golf course. In fact, on the same day Justice made his coronavirus statements, he announced additional federal grant money would be used “to bring property improvement and hope” to Greenbrier County.

Year after year, under both Democratic and Republican leadership, budgets for DHHR and other critical public infrastructure have been slashed to the bone. Each cut has been justified by the long-term fall in severance taxes coming from the declining coal

industry, even as the state has all but eliminated taxes for the wealthy and energy companies. In January, facing projections of \$108 million less in revenue, state officials proposed siphoning off money set aside for Medicaid into “general revenue” budget gaps totaling \$309 million.

The governor has insisted the state’s economic picture is better than it has been in years. “If you don’t think things are rosy, you’re just out of your mind,” the governor said in February.

In fact, wages, employment options and infrastructure for the overwhelming majority of residents have declined. At the same time, the state has made it more difficult to access help by tying the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, food stamps, to employment requirements as of January 1, 2020.

Despite powerful statewide strikes by teachers and other school employees in 2018 and 2019 demanding more money for schools and full funding for their health care plans, West Virginia still ranks near the bottom nationally for education spending after those struggles were sold out by the teachers unions and Democratic Party.

Low wages, lack of paid leave options for both private and public workers, and the high cost of childcare threaten to turn the coronavirus school closures into a crisis of another dimension for families. Many working parents will either be forced to take unpaid leave or bring their children to work with them—nullifying the “social distancing” purpose of the school closures.

A large percentage of the youth population relies on schools for rudimentary food, health and other social needs. State school officials estimate that nearly 200,000 students depend on schools for their daily nutrition.

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