

Cuomo presses forward with Medicaid cuts as New York City health care system overwhelmed by pandemic

By Josh Varlin
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Governor Andrew Cuomo is pushing forward with planned cuts to Medicaid even as the New York City health care system is already overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic. Dr. Mitchell Katz, the CEO of NYC Health + Hospitals, the city's public hospital network, told a news conference Wednesday that the city will run out of ventilators on Sunday, April 5.

Hospital beds for patients and personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers are running low or already depleted. While both New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, both Democrats, have claimed that there is sufficient PPE—although even they admit that will run out this week without federal aid—nurses have refashioned garbage bags into protective gowns, and a doctor posted on Twitter that she was given a New York Yankees branded rain poncho as PPE.

With medical workers instructed to reuse masks for as long as five days, NYC Health + Hospitals' claims that "[r]eports of lack of personal protective equipment and ventilators in our system are false" and that everyone "who needs PPE is able to receive what they need" assume the character of the old line: Don't believe your lying eyes.

Statewide COVID-19 deaths reached 2,219 on Wednesday, up by a staggering 669 from the 1,550 deaths the day before. As of this writing, the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut tristate area has 109,524 confirmed cases, almost half of the 213,372 cases in the US.

New York City alone has 47,439 cases, more than 5 percent of all cases worldwide, placing it at the epicenter of the pandemic. According to Johns Hopkins University, there are no reported recoveries in the city, and 1,139 have died from the disease.

The sheer scale of cases and deaths has overwhelmed

the city's hospital system, particularly Elmhurst Hospital, a public hospital in Queens, which has been termed "ground zero" of the pandemic. Queens is the hardest-hit borough in New York City, and has the fewest hospital beds per capita—half of the ratio in Manhattan.

In addition to the disparities in health care access, Dr. Katz attributed the high caseload in Queens to the large numbers of extended families living together in tight quarters, essentially modern-day tenements. Queens is the most ethnically diverse area on the planet, and about half of its residents are immigrants.

Illustrating the class nature of the pandemic, heat maps of both confirmed cases and the percentage of tests coming back positive map quite closely with concentrations of poverty. The weeks of delay at every level—federal, state and local—imperiled the lives of millions of working-class New Yorkers, who were kept on the job or in public schools long past the point it was safe to do so.

In a desperate bid to increase hospital beds, the US Navy hospital ship *Comfort* has arrived in New York Harbor, and temporary bed capacity has been added or is planned at the Javits Center, the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center and in Central Park. Altogether, these facilities will add 3,018 beds to the city's capacity, while the state as a whole is projected to have a beds shortfall in the tens of thousands.

The Central Park facility, which adds a mere 68 beds in tents, is run by Samaritan's Purse, a nonprofit run by Franklin Graham, son of notorious right-wing preacher Billy Graham, and an Islamophobic and homophobic preacher in his own right. Samaritan's Purse asks its volunteers to adhere to a "statement of faith," which defines marriage as between "one genetic male and one genetic female." The state of health care in the center of

world finance apparently relies on the good graces of such backward elements.

Hospital morgues are so overwhelmed that refrigerated trailers have been trucked in to serve as overflow morgues. Brooklyn Hospital Center has resorted to using forklifts to move bodies.

However, as de Blasio noted in his news conference April 1, hospital beds, “in some ways, are the easiest part of the equation. ... [There is an] endless need for personnel, with a lot of people unfortunately out for a period [of] time because of the virus.”

Thousands of new health care workers have volunteered to combat the pandemic, including students whose graduation dates have been moved up, and retirees, who are in age groups most at risk from the virus.

De Blasio called for “a national mobilization of our nurses and doctors. ... If not a draft *per se*, something close to a draft,” and said he had discussed this with President Donald Trump, Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley.

Staffing levels among the New York City Fire Department Bureau of Emergency Medical Services (FDNY EMS) have fallen, with almost a quarter on medical leave while calls surge to over 6,500 a day, comparable to 9/11 every day.

One EMS worker in Queens told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “As far as exposures, at least at my station, I would say 100 percent [have been exposed].” He relayed how EMS workers are now wearing “gowns, face mask and shields on every job type” as a precaution, although they have run extremely low on N95 masks, the most effective at preventing the spread of the coronavirus.

Despite the staggering caseload, which is projected to increase to a peak around May 1, Cuomo is pressing ahead with his attempts to cut \$2.5 billion in Medicaid spending from the state budget, which appears to have played a role in the legislature missing the budget deadline of April 1, although there is now a tentative agreement with few details released as of this writing.

The proposed cuts include, according to *Gothamist*, “new restrictions on eligibility for long-term care services for elderly and disabled New Yorkers, an overhaul of pharmaceutical benefits, cuts to funding for safety-net hospitals, and less capital funds for hospitals and nursing homes,” along with cuts to the Indigent Care Pool. Hospitals stand to lose \$400 million in the proposed measures.

Not only do these cuts imperil access to health care for

the poorest New Yorkers in the middle of a pandemic, but they may make New York ineligible for some \$6 billion in one-time federal aid. Cuomo made clear that his decision to institute these cuts was based purely on budgetary calculations, telling reporters: “Two-and-a-half billion, per year recurring, is worth more than \$6 billion one shot. I would rather have 2.5, 2.5, 2.5 [i.e., \$7.5 billion over three years], than \$6 billion today.”

Cuomo has blamed New York’s congressional delegation—particularly Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, a fellow Democrat—of knowingly passing legislation that would not help the state.

The response of Cuomo and de Blasio to the coronavirus crisis, media promotion notwithstanding, has exposed that they, like Trump, regard the needs of the working class with malign neglect and are focused principally on the needs of Wall Street and the big corporations.

Kelley Cabrera, a nurse at Jacobi Medical Center, part of NYC Health + Hospitals, aptly told the *New York Daily News*: “Trump has blood on his hands. I can’t be more blunt than that.” One could add that Cuomo’s and de Blasio’s are no less bloody in this affair.

At Wednesday’s news conference, de Blasio repeated one of Trump’s refrains: “We had no idea there would be a COVID-19 crisis.” In fact, a pandemic involving respiratory distress of the kind caused by the novel coronavirus has been predicted for years, especially since the 2002–2003 SARS epidemic.

In opposition to every faction of the ruling class, Democratic and Republican alike, workers in New York and internationally must take up a socialist program to combat the pandemic.

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