

Washington, DC area begins reopening as coronavirus infections top 100,000

By Nick Barrickman
2 June 2020

Public officials throughout the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area are rushing to reopen the region's businesses, even as medical experts warn of the dangers of resuming normal economic activity. As of Friday, the Washington, D.C. region, which consists of the District of Columbia and its outlying suburbs in Maryland and Virginia, had recorded 100,000 COVID-19 infections.

Last week, the D.C. area was cited by top White House coronavirus task force members as one of the United States' main centers for the infectious disease. As of Monday, the state of Maryland reported having 52,778 cases with 2,532 dead; Virginia on Friday had 44,607 cases and 1,375 deaths; Washington, DC had 8,801 cases and 466 deaths. Throughout the course of the week ending Friday, the region added over 10,000 new COVID-19 cases.

Despite this, officials throughout the region all gave pronouncements that it was time for the areas hardest hit to reopen. On Friday, the heavily infected Northern Virginia suburbs began "phase one," with restaurants, nonessential retail, childcare and places of worship resuming. In the days following Democratic Governor Ralph Northam's announcement last week, the state posted records for new infections.

The *Washington Post* reported the previous week's daily average to be 1,028 cases on Wednesday, over 100 cases more per day than in mid-May. On May 15, Governor Northam permitted rural parts of the state to begin reopening. Virginia may begin phase two as early as next week.

In Maryland, officials in Montgomery and Prince George's counties are planning to reopen this week. The two counties, which lie on the immediate borders of the District of Columbia, have by far produced the highest numbers of infections in the state, with Prince

George's County having over 15,000 cases and Montgomery County over 11,000. As of Wednesday, Montgomery County had met only two of its nine basic metrics for reopening.

Perhaps most absurd was the decision by Washington, D.C.'s Democratic mayor, Muriel Bowser, to begin reopening on Friday. Earlier in the week, the city government announced that, despite increased COVID-19 infections last weekend, the city was "back on track" to meeting its goals of seeing 14 days of lowered infections. Following another decrease last Monday, Bowser "reset" the countdown to day 11.

The infection rate for the Northern Virginia D.C. suburbs averaged about 20 percent. In Maryland and Washington, DC the rates were 12.5 percent and 17.2 percent last week. In Maryland's Montgomery County and Prince George's County, the rates were much higher, standing at 14.4 percent and 19.4 percent, respectively.

According to the World Health Organization, states and cities should be aiming for positivity rates of less than 10 percent before even considering reopening.

Demonstrating local officials' utter disregard for public safety, on Sunday, Maryland's Republican governor, Larry Hogan, expressed concern that a resurgence of COVID-19 might occur due to recent protests against police brutality. "When you put hundreds or thousands of people together in close proximity, when we've got this virus all over the streets, it's not healthy," he said on CNN's "State of the Union" program. Despite these fears, Maryland and other jurisdictions will continue the reopening process as planned.

State officials have sought to downplay the continued rise in infections by claiming that growth in COVID-19 infections reflects a corresponding rise in the number

of tests being done. “If you have a high number like we have currently in D.C., it just shows that really people who are the sickest, who are showing up for care, are the people who are getting tested and diagnosed. It shows us that we really don’t have a great grasp of what’s happening in the community as a whole,” said Dr. Anne Monroe to the regional publication *DCist.com*. Monroe is a professor of epidemiology at the George Washington University’s Milken Institute School of Public Health.

Similarly, testing numbers themselves continue to lag in the various jurisdictions. An article in the *Washington Post* notes, “Demand for testing has been slow in the District and elsewhere, experts say, because of a lingering sense of test scarcity, confusion about who qualifies to get one, a lack of easy access in underserved communities and skepticism about testing operations.”

“The District has averaged little more than 1,000 tests a day recently and has only broken 1,500 once, in mid-May. The city reported only 344 test results on Friday,” even as experts advise the city to do 5,500 tests daily, the *Post* added.

Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) officials have likewise indicated a willingness to begin service at a higher capacity than previously stated. Originally, in May, the transit system, which has seen a daily train ridership decrease of nearly 90 percent since the pandemic began, announced that it would not plan to restore full service until spring of 2021.

However, last week at an online regional Metro board hearing, David Horner, a representative of the federal government, pressed transit officials to “consider raising [their] sights for the stabilization period for bus capacity from 85,000 to 130,000 given that there is already robust demand.” Metro has reported millions in losses due to decreased demand.

Responding to this, WMATA General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld suggested consolidating routes and reopening first and last train cars to facilitate increased usage, placing operators in danger of job loss and infection.

According to the *Post*, the region as a whole has experienced a “staggering” budget crisis, as 1.4 million individuals have been laid off from jobs since the pandemic began. Last weekend, D.C. Mayor Bowser

introduced a 2021 fiscal year budget proposal that includes pay freezes for the city government’s 37,000 employees for four years. In nearby Montgomery County, workers protested against plans for budget cuts outside the homes of county legislators earlier this month.

Baltimore County, which also reopened earlier this month, announced \$58 million in budget cuts at a legislative meeting on Thursday. The budget targets schools and municipal employees hardest, with \$20.2 million in cuts in just those two areas. The county is also planning on \$69 million in reduced general spending over the coming fiscal year.

To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>