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N.J. hospitals don't have enough beds for expected 300K coronavirus patients in worst-case scenario, study says

By Susan Livio and Blake Nelson

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New Jersey lacks the number of hospital beds needed to accommodate the expected thousands of coronavirus patients who will need inpatient care, but closing schools and other aggressive “social distancing” should slow the spread of the virus and ease the pressure on the health care system, a Rutgers-Camden analysis says.

The analysis, released Monday by The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers-Camden, estimates that in a worst-case scenario New Jersey could face a 300,000 hospital bed shortfall over the duration of the outbreak.

Rutgers based its analysis of the spread of the coronavirus in Italy, which delayed shutting down businesses and setting curfews early on.

However, Gov. Phil Murphy’s plan to close all public and private schools, set a curfew and order casinos, movie theaters and other recreational sites shut indefinitely, could significantly reduce the bed shortfall to about 100,000 later in the spring, said Sarah Allred, associate professor at Rutgers-Camden and the institute’s faculty director.

Social distancing “is not going to change very much the total number of people who need to be hospitalized, but it will make sure everyone who needs a hospital bed can have one,” Allred said. “We will reduce the mortality rate by making sure we have enough health care services for the people who need it. We can slow the spread.”

“We do want to emphasize this is not the health systems fault, it’s the disease’s fault,” Allred added. “These numbers say we cannot expect hospitals to solve this problem on their own.”

The Rutgers analysis was released on the same day state officials said they was looking to expand the number of hospital beds in New Jersey.

Currently, there are roughly 23,000 hospital beds across 71 hospitals in New Jersey, according to Rutgers and state data. On average, 55 percent of these beds are occupied, the Rutgers study said citing billing data. How many of the unoccupied beds could be claimed for COVID-19 patients isn’t clear.

The Rutgers analysis assumes the sickest patients needing hospitalization will need seven to 14 days of care.

State public health officials on Monday said were working out the details to bring another 200 beds online.

State Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli, said she is in negotiations with four hospitals to reopen wings that were closed due to declining admissions, and is touring a shuttered hospital with eye toward reopening it. These actions would add 200 more beds, she said.

Donna Leusner, spokeswoman for commissioner, said the Health Department agreed with the Rutgers analysis.

“The New Jersey Department of Health agrees that early, aggressive social distancing can substantially reduce the toll of epidemics,” Leusner said. “As a result, Gov. Murphy today announced extensive statewide social distancing measures to combat COVID-19 including limiting public gatherings to no more than 50 people, and closing schools, casinos and other non-essential retail, recreational and entertainment businesses.”

There had been an emphasis nationwide on confining COVID-19 patients to special “negative pressure rooms” which are equipped to contain airborne contaminants. New Jersey has only 700 of these rooms, according to the New Jersey Hospital Association.

New CDC guidelines, however, now allow coronavirus patients to be kept in private rooms with the door closed — a decision that “changes the landscape completely,” said Dr. Daniel Varga, chief physician executive at Hackensack Meridian Health, which operates the largest hospital network in the state.

That hospital system is now looking at units they can clear out to house only coronavirus patients, Varga said.

In the meantime, they’re setting up tents to screen people who would otherwise head to emergency rooms. Mobile units are ready at two hospitals, non-urgent surgeries have been postponed, and the system spent the last three days discharging as many other patients as possible.

“We have so much COVID volume coming in right now,” Varga said, “that actually has given us a lot more elasticity in our capacity.”

Holy Name Medical Center in Teaneck recently expanded the number of negative pressure rooms from about 15 to around 65 after converting other rooms with fans and filters, said Dr. Adam Jarrett, the hospital’s chief medical officer.

Officials meet regularly with other hospitals in the county, he said, and they just transferred one patient Sunday to a different facility to keep as many of their beds open as possible.

Meanwhile, they are also monitoring an additional 120 people in the community.

In a crisis, a nearby building erected after the 9/11 attacks could hold more than 200 people in one ward.

“The problem is if the whole system becomes swamped,” Jarrett said. “I am cautiously optimistic that we will not get to that.”

People should expect to see “medical tents and other temporary structures to do initial assessments and testing,” New Jersey Hospital Association spokeswoman Kerry McKean Kelly said.

“Surge planning is well underway in our hospitals,” Kelly said. “They have formal, established plans to increase capacity as the situation demands.”

New Jersey has documented 178 coronavirus cases as of Monday, 80 more than the day before, officials announced. Three people have died.