

COVID-19 field hospitals going up in Lowell, Dartmouth

Two more field hospitals are in the works for University of Massachusetts campuses in Lowell and Dartmouth, Gov. Charlie Baker said Tuesday after touring the 94-bed medical center set up over six days at a Joint Base Cape Cod gymnasium.

Baker also announced that state officials will be publicly posting daily updates on hospital capacity and personal protective equipment distribution, providing a window into the health care system's ability to respond to an expected surge in COVID-19 patients.

An initial set of numbers posted Tuesday afternoon showed that the state had distributed 380 ventilators, plus hundreds of thousands of different types of masks, 179,733 gowns and more than 2.2 million gloves across various entities and regions.

A new hospital capacity report, based on numbers from Sunday, shows that about half of the state's total 15,900 beds suitable for COVID-19 patients are available.

"Our hospitals, who we're talking to every day, are managing the influx of new patients," Baker said. "Nobody is rationing anything, but we're still on the upswing in this pandemic. Everybody's done a great job."

He said a 95-bed field hospital in a UMass Lowell recreation center, a partnership with Lowell General Hospital, is on track to open Monday, and work on a 140-bed site at UMass Dartmouth will be finished up this week.

Three field medical centers have been set up so far – at the DCU Center in Worcester, the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center and Joint Base Cape Cod.

The military base field hospital in Buzzards Bay will be managed by Cape Cod Healthcare. Michael Lauf, the head of the health care organization, said the facility will be able to treat patients this weekend.

Lauf said the “hospital that used to be a gym just six days ago” now has portable X-ray equipment, pharmaceuticals, lab work capability and electronic medical records access.

Patients will not be admitted directly, but will go through a traditional hospital and sent to the facility when it is appropriate. The field hospital will “take care of patients that are not quite as ill as you would generally see in acute care settings, but still not well enough to go home,” he said.

As of Tuesday afternoon, 126,551 people had been tested for COVID-19, and 28,163 people were confirmed to have the disease, according to the Department of Public Health. A total of 957 people in Massachusetts have died from COVID-19.

Baker said the data that state officials are using shows difficult days and weeks ahead. He has previously projected that a surge of COVID-19 cases and associated hospitalizations will peak around April 20.

“And that’s precisely why we’re here today and planning for what we call the worst-case scenario,” he said. “We certainly hope we don’t have to use these beds, or certainly not all of them, but we wanted to have a plan to make sure that we could if we needed to.”

Baker declared a state of emergency 35 days ago. Schools and most businesses are closed, and residents remain under a stay-at-home advisory and have been asked to cover their faces if they do go outside for essential trips, including grocery runs and walks.

Baker does not wear masks when he delivers his daily briefings on the state’s response to the coronavirus. He said he wore

one on his tour of the Joint Base Cape Cod hospital and does so when he visits other places or goes for a walk around his Swampscott neighborhood.

Responding to a reporter's question about why he doesn't wear a mask, Baker said that, during his televised updates, he wants "to make sure that people actually hear what I have to say, especially when we do these briefings because a lot of the messaging is designed to get to the people in Massachusetts."

"And I want to make sure they're going to hear me and that's very hard to do if I'm wearing a mask," he said.

The governor said conversations have begun about how to reopen the state, and that testing, tracing the contacts of any infected individuals, isolation and quarantine will be "big parts of any legitimate effort and play a major role associated with any attempt to reopen."

"Reversing course too soon, opening up before we're ready and before we've done some of the things we need to do that we can do it safely and have a plan in place to make sure that we can monitor, measure and survey what's going on will only make matters worse," he said. "Everyone's had to put up with an extraordinary amount of grief and in many cases, a tremendous amount of loss over the course of the past six weeks. Taking our foot off the pedal with respect to what we need to do to push back right now on this virus would squander in many cases a lot of the progress that we've made."

Massachusetts is among a handful of northeast states joining together in a new council that plans to work on a regional framework to lift the various stay-at-home orders and advisories and reopen the economies.

The other states involved are New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Rhode Island. Massachusetts was not included in the initial announcement,

but New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said in an afternoon press release Monday that Baker would join him and other governors in the effort.

Baker on Tuesday said the delay was because the press conference announcing the council conflicted with a conference call he had with Senate President Karen Spilka, House Speaker Robert DeLeo, Ways and Means chairmen Rep. Aaron Michlewitz and Sen. Michael Rodrigues, and minority leaders Sen. Bruce Tarr and Rep. Brad Jones. The group normally sits down for an in-person meeting most Monday afternoons, but has lately moved that conversation to the phone to comply with social distancing guidelines.

“Every Monday at two o’clock – we do another one usually on Thursday afternoon as well – and it’s sacrosanct,” Baker said. “I mean, it’s on the calendar. You can’t change it. You’ve got to be there, and now more than ever we want to make sure that we don’t miss those opportunities to talk because we don’t have the same type of down-the-hall opportunity to engage when we’re not on those phone calls.”

Baker said many of the other states in the council are “significant commerce, trading and travel partners with us.”

“We are in a different place, in terms of our surge, than some of those other states are, but I do think it’s important for us to collaborate and cooperate where it makes sense on a go-forward basis, so that we know what they’re doing and they know what we’re doing and neither one of us, none of us, does something unintentionally that disadvantages or damages the others,” he said.

Baker is the only Republican governor participating in the regional council – the six other states are led by Democrats. A similar pact on the West Coast involves the Democratic governors of California, Oregon and Washington.

“Tell the Democrat Governors that ‘Mutiny On The Bounty’ was

one of my all time favorite movies," President Donald Trump posted on Twitter Tuesday morning. "A good old fashioned mutiny every now and then is an exciting and invigorating thing to watch, especially when the mutineers need so much from the Captain. Too easy!"

Baker did not directly answer a reporter's question about whether he considered himself to be part of a mutiny.

"If you've learned nothing else about the Baker-Polito administration over the last five years it's that we're a lot more interested in the work that we are in the noise," he said. "I think for Massachusetts to forge ahead here without presuming that we're going to have conversations with states that are around us about what they're up to and what we're up to, so that we make sure nobody does anything that creates harm unwittingly for somebody else, it would just be a bad idea."