

Field hospitals going up in Massachusetts in preparation for fall and winter COVID-19 surge

By Matt Murphy

State House News Service

In April when the state began setting up field hospitals in Boston, Worcester and elsewhere to deal with the crushing volume of COVID-19 patients needing care, more than 2,000 people a day were being diagnosed with the virus and hospitals were seeing coronavirus patient volumes creep close to 4,000 statewide.

But as Gov. Charlie Baker prepares to bring back the medical tents and convention center cots to prepare for the fall and winter surge of COVID-19, the governor said Thursday the situation facing Massachusetts is “nowhere near” the dire circumstances of the spring.

Baker plans to announce detailed plans to reopen field hospitals on Friday, at which point Massachusetts will have likely crossed the grim threshold of 10,000 confirmed deaths from the disease. There had been 9,994 deaths reported by the state through Wednesday.

He said the facilities will be reopening “in places that will be familiar to people,” which could include the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, the DCU Center in Worcester, the University of Massachusetts Lowell or Joint Base Cape Cod in Bourne, all of which hosted field hospitals in the spring.

“This is a drill and a process that I think at this point we have a fair amount of experience with and I think in many

ways, this is not just an issue for Massachusetts. It's a challenge for the rest of the country and frankly most of the western world," Baker said.

Baker was in Carlisle with Education Secretary Jim Peyser and Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeff Riley to tour classrooms and observe how the district has adapted to the pandemic to provide in-person learning.

The administration has been adamant that schools are largely safe spaces if proper precautions are taken, and that students should be learning in the classroom, as opposed to remote from home.

Along with 2,495 new cases on Wednesday, the Department of Public Health reported that the state's hospitals were operating at 72 percent occupancy of non-intensive care unit beds and 50 percent capacity in ICUs.

The number of patients hospitalized Wednesday stood at 659, which was up from 513 last Friday.

Asked about entering "uncharted water" with the rise in confirmed COVID-19 cases, Baker said the situation this fall cannot be compared to the spring when the state was testing 10 times fewer residents each day and the health care system had never seen the virus and was unprepared.

"We're nowhere near the uncharted territory we were at in the spring. Nowhere near it. Nowhere," Baker said. "We are definitely dealing with a surge that we talked about throughout the summer and the beginning of the fall and we're currently the largest per capita tester in the United States."

While the virus has been spreading more rapidly over the past several weeks, Baker has increased his pressure on school systems to bring students back into classrooms to prevent more lost learning time, and Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders has said the administration does not plan to

shut down the health care system for preventative care and elective procedures as it did in the spring.

"We currently have about 550 people in the hospital. We had 5,500 people in hospital at the peak of this back in the spring. Ten times. It's very different," Baker said, though his numbers were not correct. Hospitalization never climbed higher than 4,000, according to DPH data.

Baker pointed to a story in the Washington Post published Thursday that blamed social gatherings like dinner parties, game nights and sleepovers for the rise of COVID-19 across the country.

"It's the stuff I've been talking about for months now. Small informal casual gatherings with a bigger circle of friends than people were spending time with back at the beginning of the summer," Baker said.

Baker visited two classrooms where he said it was clear the Carlisle public schools were using "every single square inch of space that's available" to keep students distanced, and using unique lunch scheduling and other strategies to ensure students and teachers remain safe.

"The other thing is, every child we saw as we wandered through there was wearing a mask and didn't seem all that stressed about it, which makes them a lot more mature than many of the adults I know," Baker said.

Earlier in the day, Baker teamed up with the governors of six other regional states to suspend interstate youth hockey competitions for public and private school teams through the end of the year in response to coronavirus outbreaks linked to the on-ice tournaments.

Baker announced the decision with a coalition of Republican and Democratic governors from New Jersey, Maine, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont and Connecticut, but not New York.

The governor said that the regional approach was necessary as COVID-19 cases continue to spike across the states, and contact tracing has led investigators to outbreaks stemming from interstate youth hockey activities.

He said the problem had less to do with the actual competitions on the ice and more to do with the day-long congregation and socialization of parents and players at the rink while tournaments are being played.

"We want everyone playing across the region with the same set of rules, the same set of protocols, the same set of guidelines that are all being enforced and administered the same way in every state and it's going to take us a few weeks to figure that out," Baker said.

Baker's day concluded with a virtual ribbon cutting to celebrate the completion of the second phase of the Overlook Terrace housing development in Boston's Orient Heights East Boston neighborhood.

On that Zoom call with Boston Mayor Marty Walsh and others, Baker renewed his call for the Legislature to address the exclusionary zoning rules that he said have made it very difficult in places outside of Boston to build affordable, transit-oriented and other types of housing.

The House and Senate are both considering Baker's housing proposals as part of a larger economic development package currently being negotiated by a conference committee.

"I really do hope that we can get that done before the end of the session," Baker said.