

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2020 • HOUSTONCHRONICLE.COM • VOL. 120, NO. 50 • \$2.00 ★★★★★

Calls renewed to step up virus restrictions

Turner, Hidalgo urge governor to act or cede authority as cases spike

By Mike Morris,
Dylan McGuinness
and Zach Despart
STAFF WRITERS

Daily new coronavirus cases reported in the Houston region topped 3,000 for the first time in the pandemic this week as local leaders again called for state ac-

tion to slow the virus' spread.

Mayor Sylvester Turner and Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo on Tuesday implored Gov. Greg Abbott to take a harder line or give local officials back the powers they had in the spring. Abbott in May pre-empted local officials from implementing the stay-home orders used in March and

April, and repeatedly has said Texas will not return to lockdowns.

"We determined what the occupancy limits were going to be in large part. We had the ability to say 'no,'" said Turner, who took questions from reporters after a holiday-themed event at City Hall. "The tools that we had in

March and April, we no longer have. We are not driving this car. County judges and mayors are more like passengers. The state is driving the car."

The Houston area's rising trends, though less dire than the data coming out of El Paso and the Panhandle, are mirrored in the data reported by the hospital systems based in the Texas Medical Center and by the Southeast

Texas Regional Advisory Council.

The call for additional state action follows a newly released report from the White House Coronavirus Task Force that said Texas "must intensify" its mitigation efforts in the face of a "full resurgence" of the virus. The report makes several recommendations for Texas, including a reduction in occupancy limits for indoor

Virus continues on A13



Michael Wyke / Contributor

Brothers, from left, Federico and Daniel Dorrijos with Ignite Christmas Lights work on the roof of a Houston home.

Light relief in 'crazy year'

Houstonians 'ready to get to some happy' with holiday displays

By Diane Cowen
STAFF WRITER

Gustavo Torijos braced himself at the peak of the roof on an Oak Forest home, a rope wrapped around his waist and over his shoulder to anchor his younger brother, Daniel.

Clip, tuck, clip, tuck. Daniel deftly attached plastic grips to eavestroughs before sliding in strings of white lights.

They're part of a three-man Ignite Christmas Lighting crew – with their other



Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

River Oaks-area homes decorated with holiday lights attract many motorists wanting "to see a little Christmas."

brother, Federico – stringing lights on the home of Laura and Matt Hogue.

In River Oaks, another Ignite crew was busy testing C90 light bulbs for strings of lights that would go up on the Mediterranean-style home of Sandy and Keith Oden while Mauricio Sanchez wrapped strings of mini-lights around the hefty trunks and branches of sprawling live oak trees in the front yard.

Across the street, another firm's workers were draping strings of lights that would hang from branches and adding more to the home's

Lights continues on A14

Liberty, Cleveland ISDs to cut online option

By Shelby Webb
STAFF WRITER

Cleveland and Liberty ISDs became the latest school districts on the outskirts of Greater Houston to cancel their online learning options this week, joining Barbers Hill and Navasota ISDs in

requiring the majority of their students to return to campuses.

Liberty ISD, which educates 2,266 students about 50 minutes northeast of downtown Houston, told parents at the end of October that remote learning would be offered only to medically fragile students, students who have test-

ed positive for COVID-19, students who are quarantining due to COVID-19 exposure and students whose schools temporarily were closed due to positive tests.

Similarly, students in Cleveland ISD can fill out a form requesting online learning due to a student's medical issues, a medi-

cal issue within the home or extenuating circumstances. The form asks for a physician's signature if the request relates to a medical necessity.

Liberty ISD Superintendent Cody Abshier said nearly 90 percent of the district's students al-

Schools continues on A13

U.S. panel puts health workers at top of list for vaccine

By Mike Stobbe
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK – Health care workers and nursing home residents should be at the front of the line when the first COVID-19 vaccine shots become available, an influential government advisory panel said Tuesday.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices voted 13-1 to recommend those groups get priority in the first days of any coming vaccination program, when doses are expected to be very limited. The two groups encompass about 24 million people out of a U.S. population of about 330 million.

Later this month, the Food and Drug Administration will consider authorizing emergency use of two vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna. Current estimates project that no more than 20 million doses of each vaccine will be available by the end of 2020. And each product requires two doses. As a result, the shots will be rationed in the early stages.

The advisory panel will meet again at some point to decide who should be next in line. Among the possibilities: teachers, police, firefighters and workers in other essential fields such as food production and transportation; the elderly; and people with underlying medical conditions.

Tuesday's action merely designated who should get shots first if a safe and effective vaccine becomes available. The panel did not endorse any particular vaccine. Panel members are waiting to hear FDA's evaluation and to see more safety and efficacy data before endorsing any particular product.

Experts say the vaccine will probably not become widely available in the U.S. until the spring.

The panel of outside scientific experts, created in 1964, makes recommendations to the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who almost always approves them. It normally has 15 voting members, but one seat is vacant.

The recommendations are not binding, but for decades they have been widely heeded by doctors, and they have determined the scope and funding of U.S. vaccination programs.

It will be up to state authorities

Vaccine continues on A14

Index

Business.....B1 | Directory.....A2 | Lottery.....A2 | Sports.....C1
Comics.....D5 | Editorials.....A16 | Markets.....B4 | TV.....D4
Crossword...D4 | Horoscope...D5 | Obituaries.....B7 | Weather.....B8



@HoustonChron



Houston-Chronicle



@HoustonChron



@HoustonChronicle

HoustonChronicle.com: Visit now for breaking news, constantly updated stories, sports coverage, podcasts and a searchable news archive.



6 37953 11111 0

5
days left!

Your chance to get all of the benefits Medicare provides - **plus so much more** - is almost gone. Enroll today!

KelseyCare Advantage is an HMO with a Medicare contract. Enrollment in KelseyCare Advantage depends on contract renewal.
©2020 KelseyCare Advantage. All rights reserved. H0332_NPSAOE5D1085_M

KelseyCare Advantage

Our local member services team is here to help - visit www.KelseyCareAdvantage.com/5DaysLeft or call 713-442-9598 to learn more.

FROM THE COVER

VIRUS

From page A1

spaces and weekly testing of teachers, college students, hospital staff and others for COVID-19.

In response, Abbott's office on Tuesday emphasized the executive order the governor issued in October that closes bars and caps restaurant capacity at 50 percent in any region where the number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients tops 15 percent of hospital capacity for seven straight days.

As proof of the policy's efficacy, Abbott spokeswoman Renae Eze pointed to El Paso, which has recorded a sharp drop in the number of daily reported new cases over the last month, and which has seen daily new COVID-19 hospital admissions decline over the last two weeks. The El Paso region triggered the rollback provisions on Oct. 18.

"Local officials have full authority to enforce these existing protocols to help mitigate this virus, including occupancy limits and mask requirements," Eze said. "The protocols proved effective in slowing the spread over the summer and containing COVID-19, and they continue to work now."

As of this week in the Houston region virus patients comprised 9 percent of total hospitalizations, according to state data. The El Paso region was one of 10 — out of 22 trauma regions statewide — to exceed the 15 percent threshold as of Monday, with 36 percent of its hospital beds filled with COVID-19 patients; the two Panhandle regions also topped 30 percent.

Though the Houston region has not crossed the state's threshold for rollbacks, SETRAC data shows 23 percent of Harris County patients requiring intensive care have COVID-19, far in excess of the county's 15 percent warning threshold.

The virus' spread, Hidalgo said, approximates the levels being reported when she placed the county at its highest — "red" — threat level in June.

"It was soon after that that the governor pulled back a little bit, and the numbers kept climbing until finally they peaked at a level where they routinely exceeded



Steve Gonzales / Staff photographer

Mayor Sylvester Turner, with director of community relations Leanne Schneider, puts the last decorations on the official holiday tree Tuesday. The tree will be lit at a celebration on Saturday.

By the numbers

10

Number of Texas' 22 trauma service regions where hospitalized COVID-19 patients topped 15 percent of that region's hospital capacity as of Monday. If an area exceeds that threshold for seven straight days, a Gov. Greg Abbott executive order closes bars and caps restaurants at 50 percent capacity.

9 PERCENT

The share of Houston-area hospital beds filled with COVID-19 patients as of Monday

23 PERCENT

The share of Harris County intensive care hospital beds filled by patients with COVID-19; the county's warning threshold is 15 percent.

1,042

The number of COVID-19 patients hospitalized in Harris County as of Tuesday, a level not seen since August.

Sources: SETRAC, Texas Department of State Health Services

base hospital capacity" in ICUs, she said. "And so if we go much longer without action, we're going to be in a bad place."

One issue of concern to Turner and Hidalgo was that bars collecting less than 51 percent of their revenue from alcohol can operate

as restaurants; the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission in August made that easier by broadening the scope of revenue that can be recorded as non-alcohol sales.

"Bars can be open. So, we're doing what we can to limit gather-

ings, but that's a big, big problem," Hidalgo said during Tuesday's regularly scheduled meeting of Commissioners Court. "Because these things have been allowed, we're seeing the numbers we're seeing again now."

Turner echoed that. "Why are we allowing bars to be recharacterized as restaurants? That's not the county judges or the mayors," Turner said. "The governor's driving it. The governor can do more."

One option the city does have is a curfew, which has been implemented in El Paso and San Antonio. Turner said he reserves the right to implement one in Houston, but views that as a "nuclear option" that punishes good actors along with the bad.

Among TMC-affiliated institutions, jumps in newly reported cases have become more frequent in recent weeks, new hospitalizations have been rising for more than a month, and there now are more than 1,000 COVID-19 patients hospitalized, a level not seen since early August.

One positive note, said Dr. Marc Boom, CEO of Houston Methodist, is that the rate of

"What I'm seeing is fatigue, 'It won't be me' kinds of attitudes. We're going to have to really tighten up or we're not going to see this slow down in time for the vaccines to start kicking in."

Dr. Marc Boom, CEO of Houston Methodist

growth in new hospital admissions has been far slower than it was during the summer spike, when the average counts jumped from 101 per day to 360 per day in just three weeks. By contrast, daily new TMC admissions averaged 94 in October and rose to 141 in November.

As of Monday, the Medical Center's ICUs were 88 percent full, roughly the same level as when the pandemic was ebbing here in late September.

Still, Boom and Harris Health CEO Dr. Esmail Porsa said they see no sign of the rising counts reversing. Both stressed the role bars and restaurants play in spreading the virus, but also said they believe Houstonians can prevent another spike.

"This is about every one of us in the community looking each other in the eye and doing the right thing, really rethinking some of the social aspects of what we do," Boom said. "What I'm seeing is fatigue, 'It won't be me' kinds of attitudes. We're going to have to really tighten up or we're not going to see this slow down in time for the vaccines to start kicking in."

Porsa agreed.

"I am extremely concerned that folks are going to wait until we're back in the situation like July, when basically our regular ICU capacity was inundated with COVID, and I'm hoping we collectively have learned our lesson so we don't wait until we get to that dire situation before we really buckle down," Porsa said. "It's absolutely not too late for us to turn this thing around."

mike.morris@chron.com

dylan.mcguinness@chron.com zach.despart@chron.com

SCHOOLS

From page A1

ready were attending in-person classes when the district announced the change, and only a handful of students and staff have tested positive for the virus. At the same time, the district's remote learners were failing classes at higher rates than their peers who came back to campus.

"Our children were just getting left behind. They were not able to, for various reasons, were not able to meet the rigorous demands," Abshier said. "So, rightly or wrongly, we made the decision to have all of our students come back."

Students in those districts returned to schools as cases of COVID-19 have spiked across the region and state. Texas logged 101,427 new reported cases between Nov. 23 and Nov. 30, with 11 percent of COVID-19 tests coming back positive. In the Houston region, which includes Liberty and Cleveland, daily reported coronavirus cases topped 3,000 for the first time this week, slightly exceeding the new cases logged during the area's summer spike.

The numbers are rising to the point of a "full resurgence" of the virus, according to a White House Coronavirus Task Force report released last week. The report said Texas "must intensify" its mitigation efforts to bring the virus under control, which would include weekly COVID-19 testing of teachers, college students, hospital staff and others.

Some more rural areas of the region have not seen as sharp an increase. Liberty County, for example, reported slightly more than 10 new cases per capita in mid-November, less than a quarter of the 45 cases per capita it had logged during summer; Grimes County, where Navasota ISD is located, reported fewer than 10 cases per capita in late No-

vember.

Balancing the rising COVID-19 cases and the academic needs of students has proved a challenge, especially as district leaders across the Houston region report that their remote students are failing at unprecedented rates.

Navasota ISD Superintendent Stu Musick, who announced in October that students would need to return to campuses later that month, said the failure and absentee rates of remote

"Our children were just getting left behind. They were not able to, for various reasons, were not able to meet the rigorous demands. So, rightly or wrongly, we made the decision to have all of our students come back."

Cody Abshier, Liberty ISD superintendent

students were much higher than those of in-person students in his district, too. He said teachers and administrators would not have minded putting in the extra work if their efforts were helping students succeed, but the online-only students were not.

Since students returned to schools on Oct. 20, grades and attendance have improved, Musick said. Attendance rates are back up to about 95 percent, versus the 78.5 percent remote students logged during the first five weeks of the first grading period. The percentage of students failing four or more classes is down to less than 5 percent, compared with the 23 percent of online-only students who were failing that many courses near the end of the first grading period.

"We have an educational crisis for kids. They were out of school for three months, and we have some kids that still haven't come back to school. That's going to cause academic concerns that are going to last for years," Musick said. "For Navasota ISD, those who have come back on campus we're now able to see them every day and be accountable for them ourselves and hold them accountable. It's just been a whole lot better."

Other districts, including Angleton ISD and Brazosport ISD in Lake Jackson, also will require more students to return. Both announced that they will contact remote students who are failing classes near the end of this semester and tell them they will need to come back to campuses in January, barring any medical conditions or extenuating circumstances.

The Texas Education Agency has received 148 applications from districts across the state seeking to require individual students to return to campuses if they are not passing their virtual courses.

Brazosport ISD Superintendent Dan Massey said he did not want to force students to come back if they were doing well with their remote coursework. However, he said, nearly a quarter of the district's remote students are failing two or more courses.

"We understand the virus is still among us, and for some kids it's very dangerous to contract even though cases here are very low," Massey said. "We have many students who are doing very well at home virtually, and a lot of them have done very well because of the efforts of our teachers. It's the 25 percent that have not done well, those are the ones that we are encouraging to come back."

Jordan Rubio contributed to this report.

shelby.webb@chron.com

ROSS + SIMONS

fabulous jewelry & great prices for more than 65 years

Our meaningful sterling silver necklace

Make your mark with our lovely sterling silver necklace! A round disc suspends from a shining popcorn chain, ready to be engraved with a single initial or monogram in block or script type. Both classic and personal, it's also the perfect choice for gift giving.

\$99
Plus Free Shipping

Sterling Silver Personalized Disc Necklace
18" popcorn chain. Disc is 3/4" diameter. Lobster clasp.
Please allow 2-3 business days for personalization.
Also available in 20" \$109

Ross-Simons Item #907312
To receive this special offer, use offer code: **FORYOU51**
1.800.556.7376 or visit ross-simons.com/foryou