

West Virginia Update

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Contents

State's COVID-19 Deaths Near 1,400	1
DHHR Map Shows 43 Red and 11 Orange Counties	2
Governor Blames Politics for Complaints about Greenbrier Party	3

State's COVID-19 Deaths Near 1,400

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources reported today the state has recorded 20 more deaths from COVID-19 in the past day, raising the total to 1,396. The latest to die included: a 97-year-old woman from Cabell County, a 58-year-old woman from Cabell County, a 78-year-old woman from Greenbrier County, a 63-year-old man from Pleasants County, an 83-year-old woman from Wood County, an 83-year-old man from Jackson County, a 77-year-old woman from Barbour County, a 77-year-old woman from Barbour County, a 70-year-old man from Barbour County, a 28-year-old man from Grant County, a 67-year-old man from Hancock County, a 73-year-old man from Roane County, a 69-year-old man from Cabell County, an 85-year-old woman from Jackson County, an 88-year-old man from Harrison County, a 91-year-old man from Monongalia County, a 66-year-old man from Brooke County, an 83-year-old woman from Wood County, a 67-year-old woman from Wyoming County, a 77-year-old man from Jefferson County, and a 54-year-old woman from Brooke County.

Kanawha County leads the state with the most deaths with 209. Other counties with deaths include: Cabell with 104; Mineral with 66; Logan with 59; Putnam with 56; Mercer with 54; Berkeley and Marshall with 53 each; Wood with 50; Fayette with 48; Hancock with 43; Ohio with 39; Greenbrier with 36; Harrison with 34; Jackson and Monongalia with 32 each; Raleigh with 30; Brooke and Jefferson with 27 each; Wayne and Wyoming with 21 each; Mingo with 20; Grant with 18; Mason and Summers with 17 each; Wetzel with 16; Marion with 15; Hampshire with 14; Barbour and Monroe with 11 each; Pocahontas with nine; Hardy, Lincoln, Morgan and

Nicholas with eight each; Ritchie with seven; McDowell, Pleasants, Randolph and Roane with six each; Upshur with five; Clay and Lewis with four each; Doddridge with three; Pendleton, Tucker and Tyler with two each; and Braxton, Gilmer and Wirt with one each.

DHHR's dashboard today shows West Virginia has reached 91,886 total cases, an increase of 828 in the past day, the highest daily increase so far. That includes 74,329 confirmed and 17,557 probable cases. The number of active cases is 27,362 with 799 of them hospitalized, 205 in intensive care and 91 on ventilators. The total number of tests administered during the pandemic is 1,548,855. The cumulative level of positive tests compared to the total number of tests is 5.07 percent. The daily positive rate is 13.81 percent.

Among West Virginia's counties, Kanawha is in the lead with 9,072 cases. Others with at least 5,000 cases include: Berkeley with 6,651; Monongalia with 5,635; Cabell with 5,522; Wood with 5,297. Those with at least 1,000 cases include: Harrison with 3,195; Putnam with 3,128; Mercer with 3,111; Raleigh with 2,914; Ohio with 2,642; Jefferson with 2,513; Marshall with 2,219; Mineral with 2,145; Marion with 2,084; Hancock with 1,997; Fayette with 1,884; Preston with 1,805; Logan with 1,784; Wayne with 1,773; Greenbrier with 1,619; Mingo with 1,532; Brooke with 1,510; Jackson with 1,251; Randolph with 1,233; Wyoming with 1,229; Boone with 1,102; Mason with 1,091; Hampshire with 1,055; McDowell with 1,028; and Upshur with 1,026. Those with at least 500 cases include: Hardy with 834; Barbour with 835; Lincoln with 823; Grant with 807; Taylor with 751; Nicholas with 747; Wetzel with 742; Monroe with 700; Pleasants with 595; and Braxton with 561. Those with at least 200 cases include: Summers with 488; Gilmer with 437; Tyler with 393; Ritchie with 381; Pocahontas with 368; Tucker with 355; Pendleton with 331; Roane with 326; Doddridge with 275; Clay with 271; and Wirt with 244. Those with at least 100 cases include: Webster with 171; and Calhoun with 140. No county is left with fewer than 100 cases.

DHHR reports whites make up 58.3 percent of cases, blacks make up 2.7 percent and others make up 38.1 percent.

The DHHR dashboard reports 103,375 doses of vaccine had been delivered to West Virginia by this morning, and 52,221 doses had been administered.

More information is available from DHHR's online dashboard at: <https://dhhr.wv.gov/COVID-19/Pages/default.aspx>.

DHHR Map Shows 43 Red and 11 Orange Counties

The daily County Alert System map from the Department of Health and Human Resources shows 41 red counties today. They include Barbour, Berkeley, Boone, Braxton, Brooke, Cabell, Doddridge, Gilmer, Grant, Greenbrier, Hampshire, Hancock, Hardy, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Lincoln, Logan, Marion, Marshall, Mercer, Mineral, Mingo, Monongalia, Monroe, Nicholas, Ohio, Pendleton, Pleasants, Pocahontas, Preston, Putnam, Raleigh, Ritchie, Taylor, Tyler, Upshur, Wayne, Webster, Wetzel, Wirt, Wood and Wyoming.

Eleven other counties are orange on today's map. They include Clay, Fayette, Kanawha, Lewis, Mason, McDowell, Morgan, Randolph, Roane, Summers and Tucker.

Calhoun is the only gold county. No county is yellow or green.

Red is for counties with the highest level of COVID-19 cases. Orange is the next level down, followed by gold, yellow and green.

Governor Blames Politics for Complaints about Greenbrier Party

Gov. Jim Justice said today that criticism about a crowded New Year's Eve party at The Greenbrier, the resort his family owns, is just "a political hit" at him. He also said in today's COVID-19 briefing that the state is working to get more people vaccinated while also preparing to give second shots of vaccine to some people who received their first shots early, and he defended his decision to send students back to classrooms at most schools later this month.

In addition, Maj. Gen. James Hoyer of the West Virginia National Guard explained what went wrong when 44 people in Boone County received a COVID-19 treatment instead of vaccinations and what has been done to correct the problem.

On the issue with The Greenbrier, Justice again showed how sensitive he is to criticism and turned questions from reporters around to accusations. A video of the New Year's Eve event showed a crowded room in which some people wore masks, but many people didn't. Many people have complained about an apparent double standard in which small businesses and others face stricter provisions than The Greenbrier and its wealthy guests do. But Justice blamed Democratic state senators for spreading the video and trying to strike at him politically.

"It's just a slap at an employer that is employing 1,500 people in great jobs there," he said, adding that he was in bed watching television at midnight on New Year's Eve. "I wasn't at The Greenbrier; I was at my house."

"It's just a slap at an employer that is employing 1,500 people in great jobs there." – Gov. Jim Justice

Justice, who put his daughter Jill in charge of managing The Greenbrier after he became governor, offered both assurances that the resort did all it could to operate appropriately and pleas of ignorance about what went on there on New Year's Eve.

"I will promise you to God above that the Greenbrier is following every protocol that you can possibly follow," he said. But Justice said that with about 3,000 people there – half of them guests and half of them employees – someone is bound to do something wrong. He said he hasn't been in the interior of The Greenbrier for a year or so,

“I’m not going to apologize to you for employing 1,500 people there and doing the work that we’ve done in lots of different places,” Justice said. “Would it make you happy if I said the thing we really ought to do is just close it?”

The Greenbrier loses money this time of year, he said, so it would save him money to close the resort in the winter months.

“I don’t want any special nothing for me,” Justice said. “I never have.”

However, about the crowded New Year’s Eve party, he also said, “This shouldn’t happen.”

When Dr. Ayne Amjad, state public health officer, was asked for her reaction, she said the Bureau for Public Health is concerned about such events, but she stopped short of condemning it. “We are aware of such events across the state and get multiple calls all the time,” she said.

The questions and criticism come after Justice has urged people repeatedly to avoid large gatherings, to wear masks and to keep their distance from other people. He also ordered bars in Monongalia County to be closed for several weeks and issued an executive order limiting gatherings to 25 or fewer persons. He has told West Virginians to “pull the rope” together and make sacrifices. When he was asked whether he and his family were doing the same, he took offense.

“If you don’t think I’m pulling the rope, you’ve really got a screw loose.” – Gov. Jim Justice

“If you don’t think I’m pulling the rope, you’ve really got a screw loose,” Justice said.

When he was asked about a high school basketball coach’s comments that it is unfair for Justice to delay the start of winter sports until March 1 while crowded parties are held at The Greenbrier, he asked, “Why do we need to pit one another against one another?” In other words, he said, it’s unfair to pit rich people against poor people. He also pointed out that he is the coach of a girls’ basketball team.

“I want my kids to be able to play basketball more than you’ll ever imagine,” Justice said. “Things like this are going to happen. They just plain are.”

Although he wants to wait until almost spring for winter sports seasons to begin, the governor defended the announcement he made last Wednesday for most schools to resume in-person instruction on Tuesday, January 19. Justice wants all elementary and middle schools to reopen then after relying on remote learning for the next couple of weeks. High schools in orange counties also would be allowed to resume in-person classes, which is something they can’t do now. Only high schools in red counties would be prohibited from reopening their classrooms, but about three-quarters of the state’s 55 counties are red today.

In the meantime, Justice wants to offer vaccinations to all teachers and other school employees ages 50 and older within the next two weeks. “I’m going to push that we get set up faster,” he said.

Many students are hurting by not being in school, Justice said, because many are failing core courses and others are likely being abused without the abuse being reported.

“We don’t have eyes on these kids,” he said. “We don’t have any way to help these kids.”

As he has done before, Justice charged that remote learning is failing the students.

“The virtual concept is better than nothing,” he said. “The virtual concept does not replace the in-person situation that you have with a teacher and how you interact in a classroom.”

Asked about the decision to get most students back into their classrooms, Justice said he didn’t make it alone. He said he shared it with officials in the Department of Education and others in the public school system.

“For the most part, all the superintendents were saying we got to get back in school,” Justice said. “This virtual stuff is not working, and we’re failing our kids every way you can fail our kids.”

“For the most part, all the superintendents were saying we got to get back in school.” – Gov. Jim Justice

The color-coded maps that indicate the level of COVID-19 infection in each county to determine where schools can hold in-person classes and where they can’t have served West Virginia well, he said, but from now on, the maps will apply only to high schools. He wasn’t clear on whether the Department of Education would still issue a weekly map or whether the schools would be governed by the daily maps issued by the Department of Health and Human Resources. He added that parents and county superintendents still can opt for remote learning even if in-person classes are permitted.

When Justice was asked about teachers who are antsy about getting vaccinations, he did not offer any argument about the safety of the vaccines, just the safety of the school environment.

“We were in school before, and now, we’re only increasing their safety level,” he said. People employed at grocery stores face a wider variety of people than school employees do, he said, but they still must go to work. He added that the federal government is sending another \$300 million from the latest stimulus bill to make schools safer.

Asked about the schedule for vaccinations of school employees, Justice said he remains hopeful that all of them can be vaccinated by January 19. “I’m really pushing to get it done right now,” he said.

In regard to vaccines, Justice said, the state soon will have to report on how many doses it has received for the first round of shots and how many are for the second round. “We’ve put these together, and we need to separate them,” he said. Both the Pfizer vaccine and the Moderna vaccine require two separate shots weeks apart.

The state has received about 87,000 total doses of vaccine for the first round of shots, Justice said, and it is about time for some people to get the second round. The state has received about 16,000 doses for the second shot, he said.

West Virginia’s current vaccine administration rate is 43.61 percent, Justice said, but if you consider about 52,000 people have received their first dose out of about 87,000 total doses, the percentage should be higher, close to 60 percent.

The first shot increases the likelihood of avoiding illness from COVID-19 to about 50 percent, he said, and the second shot increases it to about 95 percent.

Justice said he came to his decision to accelerate vaccinations for school employees and people age 80 and older by himself because he wants to make sure the vaccines are administered as soon as possible. “If we don’t watch out, we’re going to get caught in the situation that where we have vaccines sitting on the shelf – lots of them – and we have got to move now,” he said.

His announcement Wednesday that anyone age 80 or older would be able to get vaccinations right away took many local health departments by surprise, but Justice was pleased to say that, by today, 8,300 West Virginians in that age group had been vaccinated. “We saved a potful of lives right there,” he said.

Another 37,000 doses need to be administered right away, Justice said, because more will come in this week. The state will release a schedule for vaccinations on Tuesday, he said, and the plan is to go to an appointment process to ensure the vaccinations are provided more efficiently and no doses sit around very long.

“We had a break in process last week. That caused a challenge for us.” – Maj. Gen. James Hoyer

On the issue of the 44 people who received injections for the Regeneron COVID-19 treatment instead of vaccinations last week in Boone County, Hoyer explained, “We had a break in process last week. That caused a challenge for us.”

Asked for more information, he said, “There was a break at three points in the process that we have since identified and are putting additional training and putting an additional process step in. The good news is that, at another point in that process at another site, that [problem] was identified, and when it was identified, it immediately triggered our process to stop, notify and correct.”

Hoyer, who was in his last day today as adjutant general of the West Virginia National Guard, added, “We are in a good place to avoid another issue like this going forward.”

Dr. Clay Marsh, the state’s COVID-19 czar, said the Regeneron shouldn’t harm any of the 44 people who received it in Boone County last week. “This process is constantly being improved and assessed, and as we find anything that we can do better...we will continue to make sure that that is safe and has the highest quality and the fastest speed,” he said.

Hoyer said West Virginia expects to get another 23,000 doses of vaccines this week, “That is nowhere near what we need,” he said.

*“That is nowhere near what we need.” –
Maj. Gen. James Hoyer*

For school employees ages 50 and older, a site for vaccinations will be set up in each of West Virginians 55 counties, Hoyer said.

“In addition to that, you will hear about some specific locations where the National Guard, local health departments and our federally qualified health clinics will do clinic vaccine sites by appointment,” he said. “We will continue to press as hard as we can in the appropriate manner to get things out.”

On other matters, Justice said:

- West Virginia has 10 outbreaks associated with schools, although schools have not been open since before Christmas.
- The state has 118 outbreaks at long-term care facilities.
- Sixteen outbreaks are associated with churches in 12 counties: Greenbrier, Harrison, Jackson, Marion, McDowell, Mingo, Monongalia, Nicholas, Raleigh, Summers, Upshur and Wyoming.
- The corrections system has 601 inmates with active cases, including 253 at St. Marys, 246 at the Central Regional Jail, 80 at Tygart Valley and three (down from more than 270 last week) at the Eastern Regional Jail, as well as 54 staff members with cases.
- The state has a new COVID-19 Vaccine Info Line at 1-833-734-0965. Information also is available online at: vaccinate.wv.gov.
- State revenues were flat in December, and the year-to-date, halfway through the state fiscal year, the state was running \$127.2 million, or 5.3 percent, above revenue estimates.



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