Officials scale back McCormick Place plans by 2,000 beds as coronavirus curve flattens

By LISA SCHENCKER
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City and state officials have decided to open 2,000 fewer beds at the McCormick Place medical center for now, citing the slowing growth of COVID-19 cases in Illinois.
McCormick originally was supposed to have 3,000 beds in case Chicago-area hospitals were hit with more coronavirus patients than they could handle at once. For the time being, however, a planned 1,750-bed hall won’t be opened. And a separate hall for sicker patients has been scaled back by 250 beds.

In recent weeks, Gov. J.B. Pritzker has said Illinois has been bending the curve, meaning the number of cases is growing at a slower rate than it was. Around the beginning of April, cases were doubling every 3.6 days, and as of mid-April, that had been stretched to about 8.2 days.

“We have made alterations at McCormick Place where there are fewer beds that will be available than the original plan because it appears, at least for the moment, that we’re only gradually increasing the number of... hospitalizations and the result of that is we will probably need fewer beds there,” Pritzker said Saturday.

The supplies and resources that were going to be used in the 1,750-bed hall might be sent where they’re needed more, said Dr. Nick Turkal, executive director of the McCormick Place alternate care site and a former CEO of Advocate Aurora Health.

It’s possible that officials still could open the hall in the future if the growth of COVID-19 cases in the state accelerates. Pritzker has said he expects the illness to peak in Illinois mid-May.

Health officials said they were planning for the worst and hoping for the best. Flattening the curve helped give them time to prepare, Turkal said.

“This virus has been completely unpredictable,” he said. “Our mantra at McCormick was we were going to be flexible and adapt to what was needed in the community and needed by our hospital partners.”

Chicago Deputy Mayor Samir Mayekar noted that McCormick still will have two halls with 500 beds each available for patients.

One of those halls began accepting patients earlier this month. Turkal declined to say how many patients are there. Dr. Ngozi Ezike, director of the Illinois Department of Public Health, said Tuesday that there were fewer than a dozen patients at McCormick.

The open hall is for patients who are not severely ill, such as those who can walk on their own and may need only low levels of oxygen. That space occupies Hall C, which previously has hosted the Chicago Auto Show and packet pickup for the Shamrock Shuffle. It features 500 individual bays, sized 10-feet-by-10-feet, with three walls each and cloth doors.

So far, McCormick has taken patients from most of the major hospital systems in the city, Mayekar said. McCormick takes patients from hospitals, not from the community at large.

“Generally, what we’re getting are calls from hospitals at or near capacity that have a lot of COVID patients and are trying to make sure they maintain adequate beds space in the hospital to continue to serve new patients as they come in,” Turkal said.

As of Friday, the state still had many intensive care unit beds available, listing about 947 open ICU beds out of 3,456 total. But some individual hospitals and regions of the state have been running lower on ICU beds.
Officials are in the process of setting up another 500-bed hall at McCormick for sicker patients. That hall, which originally was supposed to have 750 beds, will feature negative pressure areas, meaning the air in those spaces won’t recirculate through the facility. Each bed will be in its own tent. Construction is about done, and it could be ready to accept patients within a few days, if needed, Turkal said. McCormick is not meant to house patients in need of intensive care.

The Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, the agency that runs McCormick Place, was authorized to spend up to $13 million on construction of the medical center. It was built by workers from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Illinois National Guard and local contractors. The majority of costs related to McCormick Place are being reimbursed by the federal government, Mayekar said.

Though the city may not end up needing the 3,000 beds originally planned for McCormick, Turkal said it was important to plan as if they’d be required.

“Look at what happened to hospitals in New York,” Turkal said. “The best information we had in March was we would be in the same situation in Chicago, and we did the right thing by being prepared.”

Some experts have said that a second wave of the illness could strike in the winter. But Turkal said McCormick is not meant to be kept open indefinitely.

“Our belief is we’re here through this wave, and we’ll take direction from our hospital partners, McCormick Place and the city and state as we evaluate how long that is, but eventually we need to return McCormick Place to being a convention center,” he said.

Other facilities in Illinois, including the former Advocate Sherman Hospital in Elgin, Westlake Hospital in Melrose Park and MetroSouth Medical Center in Blue Island also have been designated as alternate care sites.

On Saturday, Pritzker said those sites “don’t need to be spun up until there is a projection that we will need that capability.”

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“So we're making them ready, they’re in a kind of state of readiness, but not turned on yet because it does not appear, at least at the moment, that we need them in the near future,” he said.