Illinois tops 5,000 coronavirus cases as construction on a McCormick Place field hospital begins

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CHICAGO TRIBUNE | MAR 30, 2020
As the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Illinois climbed to more than 5,000 on Monday, work began on converting McCormick Place into a medical facility that could handle a potential crush of COVID-19 cases and help ease growing concerns about a possible bed shortage in the Chicago area.

Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced the lakefront convention center will have 500 beds available by week’s end. The medical center, which is being called an alternate care facility, eventually will be able to hold 3,000 beds for patients, most of whom would have mild symptoms and would not require intensive care.

Another group of 500 beds should be available next week, with 1,250 more by April 20. The final 750 acute care beds will be in place by the end of next month, Pritzker said.

“Based on best practices around the world on how to manage positive cases and contain this virus, McCormick will be dedicated mostly to non-acute COVID-19 patients, people who could benefit from the care of medical professionals but are not likely to need a formal ICU,” Pritzker said at his daily news briefing. “Of course as I’ve said before, this is an evolving situation, and if our experts determine down the line that McCormick Place should be dedicated to a different set of criteria, we will shift our mission to follow the medical experts’ best advice.”

Officials said the facility will be overseen by experienced hospital administrators, but Pritzker did not say which government agency will take charge of the site. It’s also unclear how it will be staffed, though the state has asked the Federal Emergency Management Agency for assistance and volunteers are being sought. The governor repeatedly has called for doctors, nurses and other medical professionals who recently left their fields to come back into service.

The Army Corps of Engineers provided some information about McCormick Place’s transformation on Friday. The construction, in part, will be paid for by $15 million in federal funding from FEMA to support the Army Corps of Engineers’ project.

Mayor Lori Lightfoot said the facility will allow the Chicago area to handle the surge that “will be needed in the coming weeks given the trajectory we are seeing.”

Her administration previously announced plans to rent 2,000 hotel rooms to isolate Chicagoans who contract the virus or are exposed to active cases.

“We are actively working on staffing solutions for this (McCormick Place) site as well,” Lightfoot said. “Just like our recent partnerships with local hotels, this new space will relieve the burden on hospitals and help ensure every individual receives the care that they need.”

Construction already had begun Monday when Pritzker announced the state’s known coronavirus case count climbed by 461, with eight more deaths. Illinois has now recorded 5,057 known cases of COVID-19, including 73 deaths.

Among the deaths reported Monday was an incarcerated man from Stateville Correctional Center near Joliet. There are 12 male inmates at Stateville now hospitalized. An additional 77 incarcerated people are isolated at the corrections facility, while 11 staff members have been diagnosed, officials said.
Four of the eight deaths announced Monday were people in Cook County, two were in Will County, one was from DuPage County and another from Kendall County. There are now known coronavirus cases in 52 of Illinois’ 102 counties.

Illinois Department of Public Health Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike said the state continues to be in “an exponential growth phase.” Illinois is doubling its number of confirmed cases every four days. By comparison, Seattle, one of the U.S. cities hit hardest by the pandemic, sees that kind of growth every eight days, officials said.

“Think about that for a moment,” Lightfoot said. “We are doing everything in our power to keep that from happening, in terms of this escalating beyond our ability to manage it. But we will only succeed if everyone acts responsibly and abides by the governor’s stay-at-home order.”

If the public chooses not to, Lightfoot said, there could be more than 40,000 hospitalizations in Chicago — a number she has said would break the health system. Illinois had 28,619 hospital beds as of last week, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health.

To prepare for a potential breaking point, Pritzker recently activated 30 additional Illinois National Guard members to work on the McCormick Place conversion. The airmen started Monday, unloading boxes filled with materials and inventorizing them as they prepare to build an alternate care facility in Hall C.

The hall, which has been home to the Chicago Auto Show and packet pickup for the Shamrock Shuffle, will hold 500 beds. The beds will be placed in individual bays that have cloth doors that can be drawn for privacy.

“These (field medical systems) are full of all kinds of medical equipment, including oxygen tank holders, wheelchairs and baby cribs, a lot of things that will accommodate the Chicago public,” said Illinois Air National Guard Lt. Jon Kent, the officer in charge of the state Guard’s McCormick Place mission.

Pritzker said the McCormick facility will only be used as a last resort.

“The first place we are directing patients is to existing hospital beds, maximizing our underutilized hospitals first,” he said. “If we never have to go beyond our existing facilities, we will all be extremely happy.”

Amid the McCormick Place conversion, the state still is scrambling to secure the necessary protective gear and medical equipment. Last week, Pritzker said he spoke to President Donald Trump directly about Illinois’ needs for masks and ventilators, and later got word that the federal government would be sending 300 ventilators and 300,000 additional N95 masks to Illinois.

“While we do not have a final count on this yet, I can say with certainty that what they sent were not the N95 masks that were promised, but instead were surgical masks,” Pritzker said.

The state has received more than 5 million units of donated personal protective equipment and other supplies, including masks, gowns and gloves.