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Texas' COVID-19 vaccination and testing disrupted by winter storm

Dr. Anthony Fauci, White House Chief Medical Advisor, warned last week that the winter storm which wreaked havoc across most of the contiguous United States, causing massive power outages, has considerably slowed COVID-19 vaccine distribution. In places like Texas, it brought vaccination efforts to a “grinding halt.”

According to the Weather Channel, Winter Storm Uri covered 73 percent of the country with snow, the most widespread coverage in 17 years. Temperatures had plunged close to or below zero degrees Fahrenheit in many places across the South for many days running.



People stand in line outside an HEB grocery store in the snow Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021, in Austin, Texas. (AP Photo/Ashley Landis)

In an interview with Andrea Mitchell on MSNBC, Fauci said, “We’re just going to have to make up for it as soon as the weather lifts a bit, the ice melts, and we can get the trucks and the people out.” This is no small order as millions in Texas continue to lack access to potable water, with homes devastated by backed-up sewage and burst pipes making residences

uninhabitable. “It is significant,” Fauci added, “when you have that swath of the country ... that is really in many respects immobilized.”

Many vaccine distribution centers had to temporarily close their doors last week. Vaccine shipments had to be delayed. In Texas, the seven-day average of vaccine administration plummeted last week from highs of 150,000-plus jabs per day to just 15,126 doses on February 20. Only 4.5 million of Texas’ 29 million people have received at least one dose. Only a little more than one million have completed their vaccination regimen.

Public health experts project that 75 to 90 percent of the population, roughly 22 million people in Texas, will need to be vaccinated to achieve the herd immunity threshold. Dr. Peter Hotez, a virologist at Baylor College of Medicine, told the *Texas Tribune*, “Whether it achieves herd immunity or not, we’ve got to vaccinate as many people as possible in a critical period of time to save lives.” The reference here is to the concerns raised by the rising number of the B.1.1.7 variant which originated in the UK and is now spreading broadly in the US and is known to be more transmissible and lethal.

The *Washington Post*’s COVID vaccination tracker indicated that 44.1 million people had received one or two doses of the vaccine in the US, with 75.2 million doses having been distributed thus far. This represents 13.3 percent of the population that has partially or fully been vaccinated. Because of the winter storm, there has been a 17 percent decrease in vaccinations over the week before, averaging 1.36 million doses per day. On February 22, barely more than a million received a jab.

As the weather begins to warm again, there is a push to catch up with the delays. This week Texas is expected to receive 600,000 first doses, which will then be shipped to hundreds of providers across 230 counties in the state. The state’s health department estimated that the storm had prevented the administration of approximately one million injections.

Infectious disease experts are also worried that the widespread power outages across the state and frigid temperatures may contribute to a new surge in infections. People attempting to find warmth and safety from the hazardous conditions were forced to huddle together in temporary warming centers, providing the coronavirus new avenues to exploit. Others had to take immediate refuge with friends or family. Just before the storm hit, people made a mad dash to overfilled grocery stores for the last loaves of bread or bottles of water sitting on near-empty shelves.

Health officials have said that the actual fallout will not be evident for another week or two. Besides vaccine administration, testing has also come to a standstill.

At 2.6 million COVID-19 cases, Texas ranks second behind California with the greatest number of infections in the US. It is in third place after California and New York in deaths with close to 42,500 fatalities.

With three decades of worsening austerity and hopeless prospects for the future, four million workers have moved to the state over the last decade, looking for employment, driving the population up by 15 percent. Meanwhile, energy and information technology corporations, heavy industries, and an assortment of logistics infrastructure have shifted their operations into the state, seeking to take advantage of the lack of any meaningful regulation while taking advantage of the growing labor force.

At the same time, human-induced climate change has made Texas an increasingly difficult place to live. Climatologists Anne Stoner and Katherine Hayhoe, scientists at the Texas Tech Climate Center, found that since 1950 the Houston area has experienced longer, scorching summers with a growing number of days above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Severe hurricanes like Harvey, which ravaged the city and the Gulf Coast in 2017, have become more common. The weakening of the polar jet stream caused by warming temperatures will also bring arctic temperatures to the balmy region more frequently.

Rather than take account of these recurring calamities to prepare the infrastructure for future weather hazards, state and national legislators have preferred to help these massive corporations maximize their short-term profits without any regard for the well-being of the population. It is not without its tragic irony that the winter storm that has already caused such havoc for millions has also created new vectors of infection for the spread of COVID-19.

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