

# Chicago hospitals begin to lean on expanded ICU spaces as regular critical care beds fill

Additional spaces inside hospitals are being converted to provide intensive care ahead of an expected surge in severely sick patients.

By [Mitch Dudek](#) and [Jon Seidel](#) Mar 31, 2020, 5:22pm CDT

Several Chicago hospitals have moved critical care beds into unused spaces to handle an expected influx of coronavirus patients.

“We are expanding our ICU capacity into other units that are not in use because of the suspension of elective surgery,” Rush University Medical Center spokesman Tobin Clinger told the Chicago Sun-Times on Tuesday. “That is to say, while the normal ICU may be at capacity, our capacity for ICU patients is not because we are creating new areas for treatment.”

Dan Regan, a spokesman for Sinai Health System, confirmed in an email that ICUs in its system were running at 95% to 100% capacity Tuesday, and it was “ramping up our surge plans” to expand.

Those plans included the repurposing of rooms and staff at Mount Sinai and Holy Cross hospitals, Regan wrote. He also said mobile triage trailers were in use at both hospitals. The goal, he said, is to help contain the virus “by getting patients with minor symptoms evaluated and quickly sent back home with instructions and medicine to lessen their symptoms.”

The hospital system has also been working on transfer agreements with other hospitals to deal with the expected surge, Regan said.

Julie Pesch, a spokeswoman for Lurie Children’s Hospital, said it has offered to take pediatric patients from other hospitals to help with the rise in adult patients.

Dr. Jay Chauhan, president of the Chicago Medical Society, which represents 17,000 doctors in Cook County, said his members are reporting all Chicago hospitals are beginning to lean on added ICU space as their regular critical care space has reached capacity.

However, Andrew Buchanon, a spokesman for the Chicago Department of Health, said Tuesday that city hospitals are not close to reaching capacity of regular ICU beds, not to mention the additional capacity hospitals are creating.

“Some individual hospitals will be under more pressure than others, of course, but right now the ICU situation is not far out of line with what it typically is,” he said.

To ease pressure on hospitals needed for critical care, 500 beds were expected to become available this week at McCormick Place, which will be available for patients with less severe symptoms. The site will be outfitted with 3,000 beds in the coming weeks. The state is also working to open similar facilities at the former Advocate Sherman Hospital campus in Elgin and the MetroSouth Medical Center in Blue Island.

Chauhan also has asked Gov. J.B. Pritzker to grant doctors working under emergency conditions immunity from lawsuits that might stem from a variety of scenarios — including having to choose which patients receive a ventilator.

Last week, Chauhan sent a letter to Pritzker asking him to take action:

At your request, physicians have stopped (non-emergency) procedures. Meanwhile, physicians are practicing outside of their specialties to treat an unprecedented number of patients while learning new technology like telehealth and coming out of retirement to treat sick patients.

But physicians worry these heroic efforts will be overshadowed by a potential lawsuit down the road if an elective surgery turns into an emergency situation or physicians are held responsible for a decision to ration care. We understand hospitals are quickly writing policies that put the onus on physicians to decide who will get a ventilator.

Physicians want to work with you to assist in building capacity at hospitals by ensuring that all available physicians can participate without fear of a lawsuit after doing our best for Illinois patients in this unprecedented public health threat. To do this, we would like for protections to be put in place to limit physician exposure to potential lawsuits. In particular, we ask that you extend "tort immunity" to physicians under your state emergency declaration.

Chauhan said Tuesday he had not heard back from the governor's office.

A spokeswoman for the governor said in an email to the Sun-Times: "The administration has spoken with the Chicago Medical Society and Illinois Hospital Association and are working on appropriate policy adjustments so health care workers can do their work to save lives."

Chauhan said such an order from a governor would not be unprecedented and pointed to recent measures taken by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to protect frontline doctors from litigation.