

‘Fourth wave is here’: MSDH reports 2,326 new COVID-19 cases

Mississippi Today
By Will Stribling

The Mississippi State Department of Health reported 2,326 new COVID-19 cases on July 19, further documenting the hold the Delta variant has on the state and the threat it poses to the unvaccinated.

Commenting on the spike in cases and hospitalizations, State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs tweeted Monday morning: “Very sad indeed. Didn’t have to be this way. 4th wave is here.”

Delta currently represents nearly all COVID-19 circulating in Mississippi. There are 231 confirmed cases, but those only represent a small surveillance sample, so it is undoubtedly a small fraction of the Delta infections in the state. Additionally, the MSDH report on the number of variant cases in the state hasn’t been updated since July 13.

The surge of Delta infections Mississippi is experiencing is already hitting hospitals and ICUs. While hospitalizations are nowhere near their February peak, the increase in recent weeks has been sharp. Between July 5 and July 18, hospitalizations increased 154%, from 145 to 369. The number of COVID-19 patients in ICUs has increased 257% over the

same period, from 35 to 125. Dobbs said that the increase in hospital and ICU admissions is straining the hospital systems in parts of the state, like Jackson and Hattiesburg, that have seen non-COVID procedures fill up their ICUs. Monday morning, Dobbs said there were 11 major ICU’s across the state with zero beds available.

Dobbs and other health officials have repeatedly stressed that Mississippians have the choice of getting vaccinated or contracting COVID-19, and that in every scenario a vaccinated person is going to have a better outcome.

“At this pace, and given the sort of external dynamics that are in play here, we’re going to remain vulnerable for a long time,” Dobbs said. “I don’t think that we’re going to have some miraculous increase in our vaccination rate over the next few weeks, so people are going to die needlessly.”

The vaccines are nearly as effective against the Delta variant as the original strain, greatly minimizing the chance of infection and nearly eliminating the risks of developing a serious illness. Studies suggest, however, that being fully vaccinated is the only adequate protection

against the Delta variant, as a single shot of either of the two-dose mRNA vaccines provides only weak protection against infection. The Delta variant, first identified in India, is believed to be about 60% more contagious than the Alpha variant and up to twice as contagious as the original strain of COVID-19.

Delta is now also the dominant variant across the United States. Nationally, the average number of new cases has started to trend upwards due to localized Delta outbreaks in places such as Mississippi with low vaccination rates.

The Delta variant has considerably increased the already high risks posed by the virus to unvaccinated people. Between June 3 and July 1, 95% of all COVID infections in Mississippi were among the unvaccinated. During that period, the same group also accounted for 90% of hospitalizations and 89% of deaths.

Despite the wide availability of vaccines and the risks posed by variants, Mississippi continues to rank last in the nation in the share of its population that has been vaccinated. With over 2 million shots administered, only 34% of Mississippians have been fully vaccinated.

While MSDH has made new recommendations in response to the Delta spread to protect the most vulnerable, they are just that. Mississippi has had next to no COVID-related restrictions at the state level since Gov. Tate Reeves repealed most of them in March.

Hyde-Smith calls for greater postal service accountability to customers

Cites Mississippi Cases of Lost or Delayed Mail & Passports during Budget Review Hearing

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.) today stressed the need for greater accountability on the part of the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) in light of persistent and increasing customer service complaints.

Hyde-Smith, ranking member of the Senate Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Subcommittee, cited problems experienced by Mississippians during a subcommittee hearing Tuesday to review the FY2022 budget request for the USPS Office of Inspector General and USPS Service Issues.

“We consistently hear about service issues and delivery delays. My constituents in Mississippi have told me repeatedly about delayed or lost passports, and Social Security checks,” Hyde-Smith said.

“Mistakes such as these and countless others can

trigger unexpected financial burdens that we cannot expect everyday Americans to shoulder. Ultimately, there needs to be greater accountability from the Postal Service on what it is doing to prevent these problems,” she said.

Hyde-Smith highlighted the case of 37 completed passports awaiting distribution that were lost or otherwise unaccounted for in the Memphis processing facility, and in another instance, a bride-to-be from Natchez stonewalled by the USPS as to whether her wedding invitations were merely delayed or completely lost.

“We have also had a similar problem with the delivery of Social Security disability checks. Delayed or lost checks can have dire impact on Americans who rely on those funds,” Hyde-Smith said.

The Senator questioned USPS Inspector General Tammy L. Whitcomb on

how her office could affect implementation of USPS reforms to resolve service issues.

Finally, Hyde-Smith credited the Office of the Inspector General for its narcotics program, which focuses on possession and distribution of illicit drugs by postal employees.

Promotion of superintendent’s daughter raises ethics questions in Holmes County school district

Mississippi Today
By Kate Royals

School board members for the Holmes County Consolidated School District promoted the daughter of the new superintendent from a \$47,000-a-year position in the district to the director of technology, a district-level position with an annual salary of \$82,920.

At a special called board meeting last month, the board voted to approve the hire of Superintendent Debra Powell’s daughter with only one member opposing, according to the meeting minutes.

The board first approved Powell’s recommendation of Shimelle Mayers as assistant superintendent of the district. Shortly after, Mayers presented the job description for the technology director position and recommended Powell’s daughter for the position.

The district came under fire for similar practices under former superintendent James Henderson. A report by the state auditor’s office revealed “widespread problems” in the district, including that the district paid \$14,000 to businesses owned by relatives of Henderson, and that the relationships were not disclosed to the board.

In May, the Mississippi Department of Education launched an investigation of the embattled district and appointed a financial adviser to oversee the district’s finances. Holmes County schools have received a failing grade for six consecutive years.

State law has a general nepotism statute that says “no public servant shall use his official position to obtain,

or attempt to obtain ... pecuniary benefit for any relative or any business with which he is associated.” The Mississippi Ethics Commission, the body that issues advisory opinions regarding the state’s conflict-of-interest and ethics laws, has also sounded off on a similar situation.

“If a superintendent recommends his or her relative to the school board for employment or renewal, then the superintendent will violate” the law, a 2017 opinion states. It continues to outline what it calls a “step aside” provision in the law which allows a superintendent’s designee to recommend the superintendent’s relatives to no more than two positions at a school.

“The Office of the Attorney General has opined that Section 37-9-17 is applicable only to employees of schools and is not applicable to employees of the district office,” the opinion continues.

An organizational chart for the Holmes County district shows the technology director position is a district-level position that reports to the assistant superintendent.

Questions submitted to Powell and Winters, including whether they sought the advice of the Ethics Commission before the school board approved Powell’s daughter, were not returned.

Shimelle Mayers, the newly appointed assistant superintendent in the district, said in a statement that Karneen Powell-Childress, Powell’s daughter, “was selected because of her knowledge and experience in technology and business.”

“As it relates to the position of Director of Technol-

ogy, there were three internal candidates and two external candidates. The interview committee scored the applicants and sent them to me; we did not discuss our selection with each other ... Dr. Powell was not on the interview committee, nor was she present on the campus during the interviews.”

At the same meeting, the board also hired the son of Board President Louise Winters as a teacher in the district. The minutes show Winters recused herself from the vote. A 2006 opinion by the Mississippi Ethics Commission says this is allowed as long as the child and parent are financially independent and the parent recuses him or herself from the vote.

Shella Head, president of the P-16, a council made up of public members that is legally required in failing schools, said she believes more qualified candidates were overlooked for the position.

“The fact that this woman (Debra Powell) was hired by the board May 10 (as superintendent), and the first thing she did as superintendent was to put her daughter in an \$82,000 job and overlook qualified people is very concerning,” said Head. “As president of the P-16 council, my concern is with the children of Holmes County and their education and their future.”

Head also said she does not believe Powell and the board are leading the district in the right direction. Since May, the P-16, a council with the goal of engaging members of the public in the happenings of the school district, has been inexplicably removed from the board agenda and told it must pay a \$400 fee to hold its meeting in one of the district schools, according to emails between district officials and council members. It has also still not received data it requested from the district in May, according to Head.

“The problem (in the district) is not the staff, it’s not that the kids cannot learn. The problem we have is in the district office with the superintendent and the board of education,” said Head.

The school board hired Powell, a Holmes County native, in May of this year. She was a former principal in Missouri. This is her first district level position in her career.

Mississippi hospital to require masks

By The Associated Press

JACKSON — Mississippi’s only level-one trauma hospital and academic medical center will require all employees and students who are not vaccinated against COVID-19 to wear an N95 mask while inside, a decision that a top official acknowl-

edged would not be popular with everyone in the country’s least vaccinated state and may result in the loss of employees.

University of Mississippi Medical Center Vice Chancellor Dr. LouAnn Woodward said the university has responsibility and an obligation as “the place that takes care of the sickest patients” to set the example for others in health care across the state.

“I feel strongly that this is the right thing to do,” she said, emphasizing that the vaccines are safe and offer strong protection against contracting the potentially life-threatening disease.

The policy will require all

of the University of Mississippi Medical Center’s 10,000 employees and 3,000 students to either be vaccinated or wear an N95 mask at all times while at any hospital-affiliated facility. The new rule will also apply to contractors, vendors and anyone else who might come into contact with patients.

Visitors will continue to be required to wear masks whether they are vaccinated or not.

The policy will go into effect gradually over the course of three months beginning July 26.

Everyone should be fully vaccinated or wearing an N95 mask at all times by November 1, according to the medical center.

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