

CORONAVIRUS IN MISSISSIPPI

Gov. Tate Reeves announces COVID-19 state of emergency will expire on Nov. 20

by **Will Stribling**

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Gov. Tate Reeves held a March 22, 2021, press conference regarding COVID-19 at Trustmark Park in Pearl.
Credit: Vickie D. King/Mississippi Today

Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly stated that MSDH's COVID-19 System of Care plan is still in place.

Gov. Tate Reeves announced on Thursday his intent to allow the state of emergency he declared in early 2020 to combat the COVID-19 pandemic to expire on Nov. 20.

Reeves previously announced in June that he would let the emergency order expire on Aug. 15, but **reversed course** as the delta variant pushed the state's hospital system to the **verge of collapse**.

Issuing states of emergency — which provide a legal framework for extraordinary government actions to be carried out — is one of the governor's most direct powers in Mississippi.

“With more than 3,000,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine having been administered in Mississippi and with COVID-19 infections and resulting hospitalizations being effectively managed, it is time to end the State of Emergency in Mississippi,” Reeves tweeted.

Mississippi's seven-day average for new COVID infections have decreased by more than 91% since the August peak. Hospitalization and death rates have followed this trend. Still, the state faces a hospital staffing crisis that could push hospitals to the brink one again if the state experiences another winter surge of infections.

Reeves' announcement comes 11 days after 900 nurses the state funded to help keep hospitals afloat during the worst of the delta wave left dozens of hospitals across the state. It also comes as Reeves has **refused** to call a special session of the state Legislature to address the staffing crisis.

On Nov. 5, chief nursing officers from 36 hospitals across Mississippi **begged** Reeves and other state leaders for help as they confront the need to close hundreds of hospital beds this winter due to the ongoing labor shortages.

The original state of emergency order allowed Reeves to issue dozens of executive orders related to the pandemic, ranging from imposing mask mandates to closing businesses and other activities to limiting crowd capacities at various venues.

Since March 4, 2020 — when the governor first issued a state of emergency — Reeves has issued **at least 78 executive orders and supplements** to executive orders related to the coronavirus — most of them legally allowable because of the state of emergency.

Under the state of emergency, State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs was able to mandate that hospitals coordinate under **MSDH's COVID-19 System of Care Plan**. The plan, which is no longer in place, prioritizes all Mississippi hospitals' inpatient hospital beds and other resources for COVID-19 patients who require admission.

The state of emergency order also granted Dobbs the power to issue his own health-related orders, including requiring quarantine for infected or exposed Mississippians, requiring hospitals to participate in a state-run program that allows real-time tracking of hospital bed space, and requiring school districts to report their COVID-19 infection data the Mississippi State Department of Health.

A number of other actions related to Mississippi's COVID-19 response could expire without the state of emergency order in place. These include:

- The authority for state agencies to provide paid administrative leave for public employees for various reasons related to COVID-19, such as an employee contracting the virus or being quarantined or caring for a loved one with the virus.
- The authority of counties, municipalities and local school districts to offer paid administrative leave to their employees related to COVID-19 absences.

- Dobbs' authority to mandate that all the state's hospitals coordinate with the state Department of Health to assess bed space in real time and provide adequate care for the state's hospital patients.
- The activation of the Mississippi National Guard to assist with COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, among other duties.

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