

Texas becomes biggest US state to lift COVID-19 mask mandate

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas is lifting its mask mandate, Gov. Greg Abbott said Tuesday, making it the largest state to end an order intended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus that has killed more than 42,000 Texans.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has faced sustained criticism from his party over the statewide mask mandate, which was imposed eight months ago, as well as other restrictions on businesses that Texas will also scuttle next week. The mask order was only ever lightly enforced, even during the worst outbreaks of the pandemic.

The state is removing limits on the number of diners or customers allowed inside businesses, Abbott said during a news conference at a restaurant in Lubbock. He said the new rules would take effect March 10, unleashing a wave of alarm from big city mayors and leaders along the U.S.-Mexico border, where the virus has been especially rampant.

"Removing statewide mandates does not end personal responsibility," said Abbott, speaking from the crowded dining room where many surrounding him were not wearing masks.

"It's just that now state mandates are no longer needed," he said.

Federal health officials this week urgently warned states to not let their guard down, warning that the pandemic is far from over.

Still, governors across the U.S. are easing coronavirus restrictions. Like the rest of the country, Texas has seen the number of cases and deaths plunge.

Hospitalizations are at the lowest levels since October, and the seven-day rolling average of posi-



To prevent the spread of Covid-19, travelers wear masks at Love Field Tuesday, in Dallas. AP PHOTO/LM OTERO

tive tests has dropped to about 7,600 cases, down from more than 10,000 in mid-February.

Only California and New York have reported more COVID-19 deaths than Texas.

"Absolutely reckless," California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, tweeted in response to Abbott's announcement.

Texas is doing away with the restrictions just ahead of the spring break holiday, which health experts worry could lead to more spread as people travel.

"The fact that things are headed in the right direction doesn't mean we have succeeded in eradicating the risk," said Dr. Lauren Ancel Meyers, a professor of integrative biology and director of the University of Texas COVID-19 Modeling Consortium.

She said the recent deadly winter freeze in Texas that left millions of people without power — forcing families to shelter closely with others who still had heat — could amplify transmission of the virus in the weeks ahead, although it remains too early to tell. Masks, she said, are one of

the most effective strategies to curb the spread.

The top county leader in Houston, Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, called the announcement "wishful thinking" and said spikes in hospitalizations have followed past rollbacks of COVID-19 rules.

"At worst, it is a cynical attempt to distract Texans from the failures of state oversight of our power grid," said Hidalgo, a Democrat.

Early in the pandemic, Abbott stripped local officials of their power to implement tougher COVID-19 restrictions, but now says counties can impose "mitigation strategies" if virus hospitalizations exceed 15% of all hospital capacity in their region. However, Abbott forbade local officials from imposing penalties for not wearing a face covering.

Retailers and other businesses will also still be allowed to impose capacity limits and other restrictions on their own.

Abbott imposed the statewide mask mandate in July during a deadly summer surge. But enforcement was spotty at

best, and some sheriffs refused to police the restrictions at all. And as the pandemic dragged on, Abbott ruled out a return to tough COVID-19 rules, arguing that lockdowns do not work.

Politically, the restrictions elevated tensions between Abbott and his own party, with the head of the Texas GOP at one point leading a protest outside the governor's mansion. Meanwhile, mayors in Texas' biggest cities argued that Abbott wasn't doing enough.

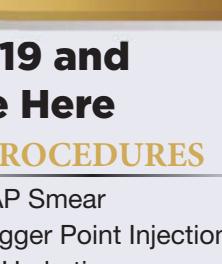
Most of the country has lived under mask mandates during the pandemic, with at least 37 states requiring face coverings to some degree.

But those orders are increasingly falling by the wayside: North Dakota, Montana and Iowa have also lifted mask orders in recent weeks.

In Texas, it was only last week that emergency restrictions on restaurants and businesses were relaxed in the Rio Grande Valley, which has been walloped by the virus like few other places in America.

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No charges in police shooting of Black man in Kansas City

LIBERTY, Mo. (AP) — A Kansas City police officer who shot and killed a Black man last year will not be charged in the death, the Jackson County prosecutor announced.

Donnie Sanders, 47, was shot in an alley on March 12, 2020. The officer, whose name has not been released, told investigators that he thought Sanders was pointing a gun at him. Sanders had a cellphone in his pocket but was not armed, investigators said.

Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker said in a news release Monday that two witnesses corroborated the officer's account; One said Sanders appeared to have a gun and another said Sanders had his arm extended and was moving toward the officer when he was shot.

Peters Baker said evidence in the case doesn't support charges.

Civil rights leaders in Kansas City said the decision tells the city's officers that they can fatally shoot Black people without fear of reprisal.

"The system that exists is not capable of bringing justice to Black people," said Ryan Sorrell, a leader of Black Rainbow. "I think it's a corrupt and racist institution from its inception and at its root. It's just blatant naked violence without any accountability."

Sanders' death was one of several fatal shootings of Black people cited during protests against police in 2020. The demonstrations followed years of efforts by civil rights organizations pushing for reforms to improve police accountability and for Kansas City Police Chief Rick Smith to resign or be fired.

Gwen Grant, president and CEO of the Urban

League of Kansas City blamed a system that gives officers qualified immunity that allows them to kill Black men and women "with impunity." She said the decision was no surprise.

"It's indicative of a problem with a criminal justice system that provides more protection for law enforcement than it does for civilians," Grant said. "The effect of that is where we see a disproportionate impact on Black lives."

The police department said it mourns any loss of life, particularly when an officer is involved.

"The Kansas City Missouri Police Department provided the prosecutor with all the facts known in the case, and we respect the judicial process and the outcome," the department said in a statement.

Court documents said the officer was following Sanders because he believed he was speeding and improperly used his turn signal. The officer did not use his sirens or police lights until just before Sanders stopped his vehicle in an alley and got out.

A video released with Baker's statement shows the officer running past Sanders' vehicle but not the shooting. The officer yells at Sanders to "stop" and "drop it." Sanders responds but his words are indistinct in the video.

Then the officer yells "drop" at least four times before shots are fired.

Baker said she asked the Missouri State Highway Patrol to investigate the shooting and had two other district attorney's offices review the investigation. She said investigators tried to enhance the video and canvassed for more witnesses up until last week.

Abortion concerns prompt archdiocese warning on vaccine

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Roman Catholic leaders in St. Louis and New Orleans are advising Catholics that the COVID-19 vaccine from Johnson & Johnson, newly approved for use in the U.S., is "morally compromised" because it is produced using a cell line derived from an aborted fetus.

The New Orleans archdiocese says the decision to receive a vaccine is one of individual conscience. In its statement late last week, it stopped short of advising Catholics not to take the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, but adds that Catholics should choose coronavirus vaccines made by Moderna or Pfizer — if they are available.

The Archdiocese of St. Louis on Tuesday encouraged Catholics to seek out the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines and avoid the Johnson & Johnson version if possible. Like the New Orleans archdiocese statement, the St. Louis statement called the Johnson & Johnson vaccine "morally compromised." However, the St. Louis statement stressed that Catholics can get that vaccine "in good conscience if no other alternative is available."

Later Tuesday, a statement issued by chairmen of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' committees on doctrine and abortion issues issued a statement reiterating the moral concerns.

It said the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines are preferable "if one has the ability to choose a vaccine."

While not disputing the church officials' contention that an abortion-derived cell line is used in the production, Johnson & Johnson issued a statement Tuesday stressing that there is no fetal tissue in its vaccine.

Johnson & Johnson's



In this Feb. 10 file photo, a man receives a COVID-19 vaccine in North Las Vegas. Catholic leaders in New Orleans and St. Louis are advising Catholics that the COVID-19 vaccine from Johnson & Johnson is "morally compromised" because it's produced using cell lines developed from aborted fetuses. AP PHOTO/JOHN LOCHER

using a harmless cold virus, called an adenovirus, the same technology it used to produce a successful Ebola vaccine. The adenovirus is grown using what's called an immortalized cell line, and the virus then is pulled out and purified.

Several types of cell lines created decades ago using fetal tissue exist and are widely used in medical manufacturing but the cells in them today are clones of the early cells, not the original tissue.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said in a January statement that "abortion-derived" cell lines were used to test the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines but not in their development or production.

The Archdiocese of New Orleans posted its statement Friday, the day before the Food and Drug Administration cleared the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for use in the U.S.

Asked Tuesday about the New Orleans Archdiocese statement, Louisiana Gov.

John Bel Edwards — a rare

anti-abortion Democrat — stressed the need for people to use any of the approved vaccines available in order to stop the spread of the virus.

Edwards said he spoke Sunday with Archbishop Gregory Aymond about the statement.

"I don't read his statement as completely telling people who are Catholic or otherwise not to avail themselves of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine," said Edwards.