

Coronavirus Crisis in Utah and the West: A Warning to Other States

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The pandemic is accelerating in my state, Utah, and beyond. Utah continued its run of record-breaking case counts with deaths in recent days as follows: 17, 11, 15, 10, etc. Yesterday's new illness cases were 2,335. Tragic. Our current crisis is largely due to a failure of leadership by Republican Gov. Gary Herbert. This weekend he issued an emergency notice statewide finally mandating mask-wearing eight months late after many educated Utahns who believe in medicine and science, first asked him to roll out smart health and safety practices. Instead, Mr. Herbert put his trust in "Dr. Donald Trump" whose expertise has cost 240,000 U.S. deaths while 10 million more have suffered. Yet unfortunately in recent days some Utahns began to protest the state's new lock-down at the governor's mansion while others marched outside his home in Utah County. Another group harassed state epidemiologist Dr. Angela Dunn and her children at their home.

Among the protesters in Salt Lake City at the governor's mansion, one said of Mr. Herbert: "He doesn't have the authority to tell us what to do in our own lives, in our homes and what we wear," as he stood in freezing temperature and snow while gathered outside. Others hoisted flags and shouted such phrases as "Our immune system is our God given PPE," and "Tyranny spreads COVID-19." Why these Utahns won't "love their neighbor," as many Americans do, is beyond me.

The "Trump Virus," or COVID-19 as some call it, is shattering U.S. growth records everywhere. Our state is being featured in most national media because Herbert's crisis is maxing out our ICUs, hospital beds, and available healthcare workers. In my neighborhood, 13 people who worship at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' chapel where I do, currently have COVID and one died. It's getting too close for my family to not worry. Some LDS Church leaders across America have succumbed and died in just the last month. This is in spite of the Church stopping all congregations from holding religious services since March until recently re-starting, but with limited participation in only a few areas. Its leaders have stressed that the pandemic is "real" and encouraged all Latter-day Saints to mask up and practice social distancing, regardless of one's political beliefs.

I've written the White House dozens of times to ask, beg, demand that Trump take action, listen to experts, and develop a plan. All to no avail. Friends and I have contacted Utah's governor and staff multiple times, but never had a response. I tell my friends to be smart and to ignore the fact our governor and his COVID-19 task force have not been successful with their lax policies. The group's head, Lt. Governor Spencer Cox has not shown real wisdom or problem-solving skills in managing this disaster. In fact, he decided to scale it back last June, a terrible failure of leadership. Yet he's now poised to take over as governor, having won his election race easily in a one-party Republican state. Utah officials have refused until now to issue life-saving measures, preferring only to "encourage" responsibility, a faint hope that has no teeth in it. That's why Utah death rates are spiking.

I hope all Americans, as well as my Utah neighbors, stop saying that masks make them "uncomfortable," or that their children "don't like theirs." As we see schools close, high school football teams forfeiting playoffs, young people's cases growing, and hospitals overflowing, we need wisdom to save lives, not ignorance. Many folks in the West say mask wearing is an affront to their liberty. It's so ridiculous.

Nor is non-mask-wearing a matter of “opening up the economy.” Utah businesses will suffer more as joblessness grows and customers are stuck with COVID-19’s serious illness and incapacity to function. The same is true across America. Those naively hoping that a vaccine will be available soon are merely fantasizing about the future. While everyone hopes for a “cure,” we’ll be lucky if a solution is available to the general public by summer 2021.

Nationally, the crisis is escalating out of control under the sheer weight of Donald Trump’s continued denials. As many Americans naively ignore medical science, they accelerate suffering everywhere. I agree with those experts declaring this to be criminal. It’s certainly not acceptable for the White House to claim “We’re rounding the corner.” And now we’re beginning winter’s acceleration of the pandemic that will likely double our afflictions over the next several months, if past expert analyses continue to be correct. With Trump’s rejection of Joe Biden’s historic presidential election vote, government chaos is exacerbating the worsening crises of disease, unemployment, economic stagnation, rejection of election results, and growing threats of violence.

To all Utahns, as well as all Americans, I hope more will face reality and follow what you know is best. Choose wisdom. Don’t accept this terrible virus by being passive. It requires courage and ethics. None of us should heed the mantra from the White House, Florida, Georgia, or the Dakotas. The brutal declaration of the Lt. Gov. of Texas was ugly: “We all gotta die sometime!”