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Staten Island goes 'orange' as Cuomo urges coronavirus 'reality check' ahead of Thanksgiving

By JON SKOLNIK, DAVE GOLDINER and DENIS SLATTERY
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An emergency coronavirus field hospital is reopening on Staten Island, a grim reminder of how bad things once were and just how bad they can get.

Gov. Cuomo issued a dire warning Monday, reminding New Yorkers about the horrors COVID-19 wrought on the Empire State just a few short months ago, as he announced new restrictions for parts of the city and upstate.

"It took a lot of effort and a lot of pain to get to this point. How quickly can we forget what we just went through several months ago," the governor said during a briefing in Manhattan.

Ahead of Thanksgiving and the start of the holiday season, Cuomo warned against a return to the darkest days of the pandemic when hospitals were near capacity and morgues overflowing with the dead.

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"It's time for a reality check," he said. "These are dangerous times for us."



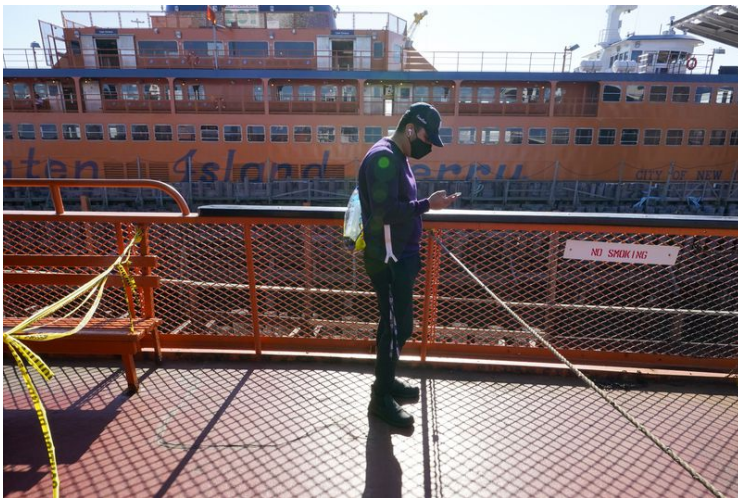
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (Darren McGee/AP)

The South Shore of Staten Island is being designated as an "orange zone," meaning no indoor dining, public and private schools must shutter, and non-essential businesses like barbers and salons must close.

State officials also announced an emergency field hospital will reopen as concerns about hospital capacity on the island rise.

"Staten Island is a problem," Cuomo said. "The number of hospitalizations on Staten Island over the past three weeks have basically tripled."

Upper Manhattan was also put on notice, joining parts of the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens as a "yellow zone," the least restrictive of the state's microcluster strategy to target areas with rising infections.



A commuter wears a face mask as he rides the Staten Island Ferry, Tuesday, Nov. 10, in New York. (Mary Altaffer/AP)

The Big Apple has been bracing for a return to citywide restrictions since last week when schools closed for in-person learning and both Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio indicated it's only a matter of time before the five boroughs see an end to indoor dining and other activities.



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The state recorded 5,906 new coronavirus cases on Sunday for a 3.08% positivity rate. Hospitalizations are currently at 2,724, a number that the governor said has jumped 120% in just three weeks.

Cuomo repeatedly warned that New York will have more than 6,000 people in hospitals being treated for COVID-19 within three weeks on the current trajectory — and that's not factoring in holiday gatherings.

At least 33 New Yorkers died of COVID-19 on Sunday, he said.

The governor pleaded with New Yorkers to take his pre-holiday warnings seriously and not to fall victim to “COVID fatigue.”

“This can not be a normal Thanksgiving,” he said. “The cases are already on the increase and we are coming into the high social season (with) Thanksgiving and Christmas. ...This is a toxic cocktail.”



A canvasser, right, hands out free face masks at the ferry terminal, Tuesday, Nov. 10, in the Staten Island borough of New York. New York City officials are raising awareness and its efforts in stemming a rise in COVID-19 on Staten Island. (Mary Altaffer/AP)

Along with his trademark harsh warnings, the governor suggested that New Yorkers should turn Thanksgiving into the “most profound” statement about how society made it through the pandemic — by skipping large gatherings and being thankful for how far we’ve come since the pandemic began.

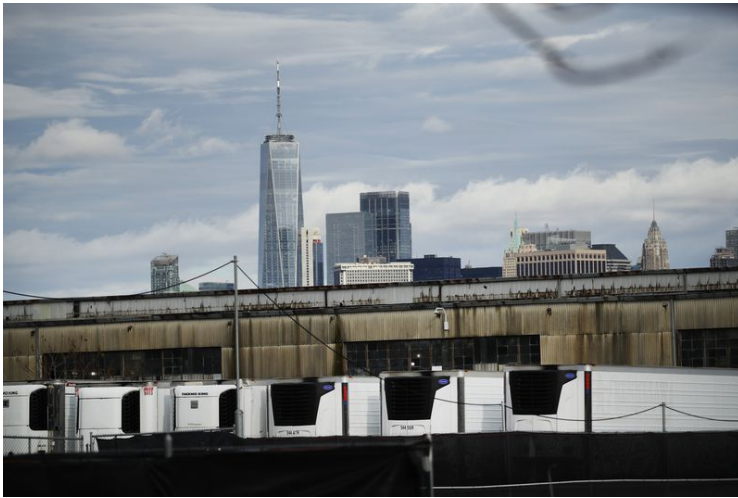
He decried television ads portraying people enjoying typical Thanksgiving meals with families eating and drinking and socializing as if everything were normal.

“This Thanksgiving is better than that,” Cuomo said. “It’s more spiritual than that. It’s more profound. It’s about life and death.”

Cuomo warned New Yorkers to remember what the metro area underwent in the siren-filled deadly days of the pandemic.

In an emotional speech, the governor, who was awarded an Emmy earlier in the day for his daily televised COVID-19 briefings, reminded New Yorkers to honor the sacrifices made by essential workers who risked their lives and name-checked transit workers, nurses and grocery store clerks who kept the city and state running.

“How quickly can we forget what we went through?” he asked. “If we’re not careful, we’re going back there.”



Refrigerated morgue trailers believed to be holding the bodies of people who died of COVID-19 are seen at South Brooklyn Marine Terminal on November 23, in New York City. According to recent reports, it is estimated that about 650 bodies are being stored in the trailers at a temporary emergency morgue that was set up in April until funeral homes or crematories can accept them. Many early COVID-19 victims that are being stored are from families who can't be located or are not able to afford a burial. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

He recalled walking through the field hospital at the Javits Convention Center in midtown Manhattan filled with 4,000 medical cots awaiting a surge of COVID patients, and the grim death roll that peaked at 799 deaths a day in early April.

“Why don't we think of them?” Cuomo asked.

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In a personal aside, the governor spoke of the decision of his daughter, Mariah, to skip Thanksgiving and stay in Chicago for the holiday.

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He recalled her frustration and pain at skipping the traditional family gathering. He recounted their painful conversation, which he said reflected tough choices made by millions of New Yorkers ahead of Turkey Day and the holiday season to come.

“Thank you Mariah for putting me ahead of yourself,” Cuomo said. “Mariah loves me so much she is not coming to be with me for Thanksgiving.”

Despite urging others to not travel, the governor suggested during an afternoon radio interview with WAMC that he would have his 89-year-old mother Matilda along with his two other daughters over for a turkey dinner on Thursday.

Senior Cuomo adviser Rich Azzopardi later said that the governor's plans changed and that Cuomo will work through the holiday.

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"Don't tell his mom -- she doesn't know yet," Azzopardi added.



Dave Goldiner

New York Daily News

CONTACT



Dave Goldiner is a political reporter at the New York Daily News. A 30-year newsroom veteran, he believes he is the only reporter to cover both the Sept. 11 terror attacks and the death and funeral of South African freedom icon Nelson Mandela on the ground.



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Denis Slattery covers New York State politics as the Daily News' Albany bureau chief. He began working at The News in 2012, covering breaking news and national politics.

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