

# Top health official heckled by anti-maskers, anti-vaxxers as misinformation spreads amid COVID surge

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As doctors and nurses battle against the worst wave of COVID-19 to befall Louisiana, public health officials struggle to combat a pervasive ally of the virus: misinformation.

That struggle was on display Monday as the state's top public health official, Dr. Joe Kanter, faced boos and jeers from an unruly audience as he testified before state lawmakers on the efficacy of mask-wearing and the safety of vaccines.

Hospitalizations rose to a record high on Monday, nearing just shy of 3,000 patients statewide. Facilities across the state have begun accepting emergency federal assistance to deal with the incoming crush of patients, for which they are too thinly staffed to provide the typical staff-to-patient ratio.

None of Louisiana's nine health regions have more than 20% of ICU beds available. More than half have a percentage of availability in the single digits.

Over the last seven days, 268 people in Louisiana have died of COVID-19, an increase of nearly 740% from one month prior, when the weekly average was 32 deaths.

Louisiana remains No. 1 in the country for new COVID diagnoses per capita.

"There's not really one part of the state that's not experiencing the surge right now. It's statewide, corner-to-corner," Kanter said. "It's as bad now as it has ever been."

Still, speakers at Monday's House Committee on Health and Welfare questioned testimony from doctors and state officials and members of the legislature and the public repeated unfounded claims and misinformation about the vaccine.

State Rep. Raymond Crews, R-Bossier City, referenced false claims about the discontinuation of PCR COVID tests by the CDC, misinformation widely spread on social media as evidence the tests are inaccurate. The test is being withdrawn not because there are any performance issues, but because it is being replaced with a test that can check for both flu and COVID-19 at the same time.

Rep. Michael Echols, R-Monroe, asked Kanter why the Louisiana Department of Health isn't recommending drugs like hydroxychloroquine or ivermectin to treat COVID-19. Kanter said he relies on clinical trials, and neither drug is recommended for combatting coronavirus.

“The idea that these medicines would end the pandemic is not only not true, it’s really dangerous,” Kanter said in an interview following the hearing. “Ivermectin is a good drug if you have hookworm. But if you’re not worried about intestinal parasites, ivermectin has some real side effects.”

Out of more than 2.1 million first doses of the coronavirus vaccine administered, there have been just eight confirmed reactions requiring hospitalization, and zero vaccine-related deaths in Louisiana, Kanter said.

But that didn’t stop attendees at Monday’s hearing from repeatedly arguing that dozens of Louisianans had died from the vaccines. They cited data from the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, or VAERS, an open-source database which publishes unconfirmed reports of vaccine side effects submitted by the public.

It is a catch-all system for any complaint about medical conditions that occurred after vaccination, but the reports are not verified and should not be confused as documentation that an adverse event was connected to the vaccine. Many events on VAERS are coincidental, a number amplified by the fact that a large number of people got the shot around the same time.

At one point, an audience member stood up and shouted: “You’re going to kill us with the vaccine.”

“You are complicit in genocide for making people take these vaccines,” another attendee said.

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Many members of the public falsely stated that vaccine mandates are in violation of the Nuremberg Code, a set of ethical principles borne out of human experiments during the Holocaust. But the vaccines are not experimental, since they have been authorized for emergency use and have been found to be safe and effective in clinical trials. The U.S. has also not adopted the Code as law, nor are members of the public required to take it if they do not wish to do so.

Monday’s hearing also featured testimony from Meredith Grembowicz, a pediatrician who said she was fired from her position at Ochsner Health for questioning the safety and efficacy of the vaccines. She said she was chastised for speaking negatively about the vaccines and told by superiors to either wear an N-95 mask, get vaccinated or quit her job.

“Her statement about the reason for her departure and her statements about the vaccine were inaccurate, dangerous and do not represent the policies or views of Ochsner,” wrote Dr. Robert Hart, Ochsner’s chief medical officer, in a statement.

The hearing kicked off in a moment of pandemonium, after Rep. Larry Bagley, R-Stonewall, the committee’s chair, made a simple request of members of the public in attendance: follow the governor’s indoor mask mandate or move to an overflow room.

The crowd of unmasked attendees, packed like sardines in the basement committee room, erupted in outrage.

“Rules for thee, not for me,” they shouted back, pointing to half-dozen GOP lawmakers sitting in front of them without masks. That included Reps. Echols; Crews; Robert Owen, R-Slidell; and Rick Edmonds, R-Baton Rouge.

Bagley adjourned the meeting for 10 minutes to restore order. Upon return, lawmakers agreed to wear their masks, and the sergeant-at-arms began removing audience members from the room.

One woman in the audience stood up and said: "Everybody take your mask off. They can't throw everybody out of here." She was promptly removed.

Audience at a meeting of the House Committee on Health and Welfare at the State Capitol, Monday, August 16, 2021. A review of the Office of Public Health's collection, validation, and reporting of COVID-19 related data was on the agenda, as well as discussion of any other laws or policies allowing exceptions to vaccine mandates as they apply to elementary, secondary, and postsecondary school admissions and enrollment.

STAFF PHOTO BY TRAVIS SPRADLING

“Somebody needs to instruct them on the proper way to wear a mask because a lot of them have their noses out,” said Rep. Robby Carter, D-Amite.

The indoor mask mandate, reinstated by Gov. John Bel Edwards on Aug. 4, has reemerged as a flashpoint of this latest surge, especially as the school year resumes and students return to the classroom.

“It’s child abuse,” said Brandi Pew of Unmask Our Kids Louisiana. "We don't trust anybody who tells us to put masks on our children. I believe in natural immunity."

Not all parents in attendance opposed the masks.

"I’m sad that people are willing to reject scientific facts and medical advice and take us down a dark road of much more suffering and much more death,” said Jennifer Harding. "Your freedom to extend your arm ends when it hits my nose."

Kanter said that without masks in schools, massive outbreaks among teachers and students would be inevitable, and in-person learning would be impossible.

“At the end of the day, if people want to have an adult conversation about whether the current state of affairs justifies a mask mandate, I think that’s a fair conversation,” Kanter said in an interview. “What’s not acceptable is to pursue conspiracy theories to confuse people or to pick apart the data to add to the confusion.”