

## COVID-19: A North State Wildfire by Another Name

December 18, 2020

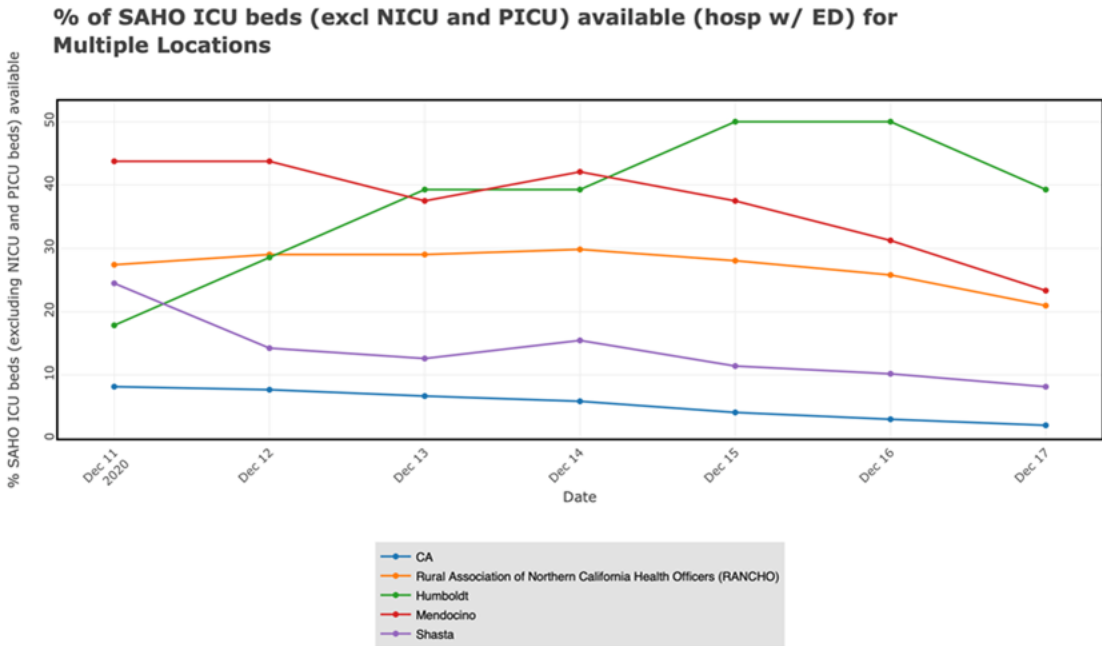
The North State is in a state of emergency. COVID-19 cases are rising, hospitalizations are reaching record highs and new deaths are reported daily. We need to respond quickly to protect our community from this growing, devastating threat.

Our beautiful region is no stranger to emergency situations. In years past, the resilient people of Northern California have worked together to survive disasters as a strong, united community. When wildfires plagued us, we became all too familiar with prevention and response practices, including defensible space, sheltering safely, mitigating poor air quality and using resources wisely. These same terms apply to our current emergency, COVID-19:

- Defensible space: Remaining six feet away from others and limiting mixing with crowds.
- Air quality: Wearing a face covering when outside the home, for ourselves and for others. And maximizing ventilation.
- Sheltering safely: Sticking close to home and limiting contact to household members only. Coupled with the above two strategies, this could result in an 80 percent decrease in COVID-19 cases in three weeks.
- Using resources wisely: The Northern California region still has adequate ICU capacity, but projections show that this could change by Christmas.

Unlike what we experienced with the wildfires, our entire nation is on fire at the same time, so accessing mutual aid is increasingly challenging. Social gatherings, travel, not masking and going out when you're sick are like fuel for this fire. Risk is higher than it's been at any point in the pandemic. Even as a region, we only have about 120 ICU beds, and 15 percent capacity leaves fewer than 20 beds – that's for people with heart attacks, strokes, trauma, and COVID-19. We, the Rural Association of Northern California Health Officers, are gravely concerned that this cushion of beds could be easily overwhelmed, and many facilities in our region are already stretched to staff hospital beds for patients requiring a higher level of health care.

The critical care capacity in the RANCHO region continues to decline and, as of December 18, 2020, the remaining ICU capacity for RANCHO is 21%. The trend in region-wide capacity reflects a decline among the three counties that make up 75%, or approximately 93, of the adult ICU non-surge beds in the region.



As your public health officers, we are asking our communities to do what they've done during times of disaster so many times before, which is to band together and do everything we can to stop this firestorm. Please adhere to the guidelines that we know slows this disease down and will keep us out of the Regional Stay at Home Order. Availability of an effective and safe vaccine is hope on the horizon, like a caravan of CalFire trucks. But we will need to equip ourselves with all these tools until we have manageable spot fires. Like a fire hose, a vaccine has minimal impact during a firestorm, but is effective at putting out a smoldering fire. Eventually, we will be in a "fire recovery state" when enough people have been vaccinated, likely in late summer or early fall. Until then, we implore you to do your part to slow the spread.

As local and regional communities, we have survived many disasters. Together, we can extinguish the COVID-19 wildfire.