What we do now is critical. Why? Because when a COVID-19 surge hits Eastern Kentucky, it will hit hard.

HAZARD, Ky. (WYMT) - The time to act here in Kentucky was weeks ago, but if you are still not taking this seriously - now is better than never.

We are approaching what will be a very critical time in response to the virus. We currently, as of 6 p.m. Wednesday, have 680 cases. Gov. Beshear warned that we are in the beginning of the "surge" across Kentucky.

In Eastern Kentucky, confirmed cases are still not widespread. This week we learned of several cases in multiple counties, including some in Perry and Pike counties that are the first in those areas. Does that mean there are not cases in every county? No, not at all. We are told to expect that someone in every county already has the virus.

Rural hospitals are uniquely posed amid this pandemic. Health officials and staff there have been able to watch the response to this virus across the country and world before having to fill up their own beds.

"So we can plan," said Scott Lockard.

Lockard is the public health director for the Kentucky River District Health Department. The area spans seven counties: Knott, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Owsley, Perry and Wolfe. There are three hospitals within that region in Leslie, Letcher and Perry counties. They also work with other hospitals like Breathitt County through the hospital preparedness program.

"One of the big things that health departments are always involved in with our healthcare partners is planning," he
What we do now is critical. Why? Because when a COVID-19 surge hits Eastern Kentucky, it will hit hard.

Planning is essential. Why? Because when the coronavirus spreads throughout Eastern Kentucky, the severity of it will be intensified. Again, why?

We have already seen countries overseas like Italy where deaths spiked as the coronavirus spread throughout the country, a country with the second-highest population of people 65 and older in the world. Eastern Kentucky, as Lockard adds frankly, is collectively the least unhealthy areas in the state.

"County health rankings have just come out," he said. "We have the poorest health outcomes of any place in the nation, so that is of huge concern to me."

The finds come from County Health Rankings & Roadmaps or CHR&R for short. It looks at a lot of data and ranks all 120 Kentucky counties into four quartiles based.

You can find more to that report by clicking here.

The vast majority of counties in Eastern Kentucky fall into the last quartile, meaning they are the unhealthiest. In Lockard's region, every county is in that bottom 25 percent.

"Our residents have other issues going on, they have diabetes, COPD, they have these other health issues, so if they get COVID-19 it's gonna have a much more negative impact on them," he added.

This is why planning for a local COVID-19 surge is crucial to keeping people in this part of the state alive.

According to Lockard, nearly one-third of people in his district have a co-morbid condition and would more than likely need hospital care.

"That is of extreme concern to me," he said.

So, what does that mean for hospitals in our area? If we see a massive surge in cases, a handful of hospitals will be where COVID-19 patients will go, others will take patients from other hospitals.

"You're looking at Hazard here being the hub," Lockard added.

ARH in Perry County would be one of those hospitals. There have already been conversations about their negative pressure rooms and what it would take to convert beds. He is also able to see the daily bed counts through a system called WebEOC.

There are 258 beds at that ARH and about 50 ventilators. For now, Lockard says that is an adequate number, but they have the resources available to get more if the situation calls for it.

Ideally, as cases began to ramp up to critical numbers in Eastern Kentucky, the areas in bigger cities would be seeing a decline and would be able to send supplies too.

"Hopefully by the time the surge is over in other parts of the state, that’s when the surge will be going on here, so should we overextend our resources, and need support from others, then we could call in that support," he said.

We are seeing places like New York where hospitals are filling to the brim with COVID-19 patients, and Central Park is going to open as a field hospital. In the KRDHD’s region, they are prepared to set up sites like that too if it were ever to come to that.

It is not supposed to be a message of fear, but that of preparedness.

Hospitals here will see a surge in cases, but we can slow that and spread it out by limiting our exposure to the public, only going out for the essentials and, of course, washing our hands.

"COVID-19 does not discriminate, and it’s going to really take a much higher toll on those who are sicker, and that’s those of us in Eastern Kentucky."

Get the latest updates from wymt.com delivered to your browser

SUBSCRIBE TO PUSH NOTIFICATIONS
What we do now is critical. Why? Because when a COVID-19 surge hits Eastern Kentucky, it will hit hard.