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Kentucky county 'hit really, really hard' by church revival that spread deadly COVID-19

Bailey Loosemore and Mandy McLaren, Louisville Courier Journal | Published 6:37 p.m. ET April 1, 2020 | Updated 9:24 a.m. ET April 2, 2020

A church revival that took place in mid-March has been linked to at least 28 cases of the novel coronavirus and two deaths in a small Kentucky community.

Hopkins County "has been hit really, really hard" by the event, Gov. Andy Beshear said Wednesday while addressing the revival.

"When people violate the rules and the recommendations that are out there ... (this is) the significant harm it can cause," said Beshear, whose family is connected to the county.

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According to the Hopkins County Health Department, a local church held a revival with a preacher from Texas on March 15 and 16 in Dawson Springs, a rural town east of Paducah.

People did not practice social distancing at the event, the department said, and several families soon reported feeling sick.

The church posted on social media that the families had the flu and did not encourage its members to self-quarantine.

Coronavirus in Kentucky: [Louisville grandmother uses 'birthday express,' locally made gifts for a special birthday \(/story/news/local/2020/04/01/coronavirus-louisville-grandmother-gives-girl-sweet-birthday/5098936002/\)](#)

Dozens of residents have since tested positive for the coronavirus, and at least 100 have been placed in quarantine.

The cases have stretched from Hopkins County into Muhlenberg, Clark and Warren counties, with a nursing home, a business and an ambulance service all linked to the outbreak.

Two people — including a 77-year-old man — have died.

Of the confirmed cases in Hopkins County, the youngest is 23 and the oldest is 79, officials said.

Denise Beach, head of the Hopkins County Health Department, said during a Wednesday briefing that several people remain hospitalized, with two COVID-19 patients in the ICU.

Beach said even drive-in church services — which sprang up across Kentucky in the wake of social distancing measures — are problematic.

It's "human nature" for people to congregate, she said.

Kentucky coronavirus live updates: [Get the latest information \(/story/life/wellness/health/2020/03/03/coronavirus-what-know-covid-19-kentucky/4939264002/\)](#)

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"We've seen drive-in churches, some of them are not following the 6 feet in between," Beach said "... It's just we're asking you for a couple weeks to just make this sacrifice. Watch church service online, watch it on Facebook. There are many other avenues."

Local leaders have been taking to live briefings to urge residents to follow public health guidelines.

"I've been asked several times, 'Can a state or the county or the city shut churches down?'" Hopkins County Judge-Executive Jack Whitfield Jr., said during a Monday briefing.

"No, I don't think we can, but we are asking everybody to not meet because we are hurting because this virus is spreading and it's beginning to spread faster and faster," he said.

Whitfield added that officials were "not trying to bash the churches."

"They are the heart and soul of our community," he said. "We are trying to control the spread of this virus. So if I've hurt anybody's feelings by what I've said or what the mayor said, that's not our intent.

"Please understand, we both go to church. I watched mine online Sunday. I love my pastor, and I love my church family, and we all do. We just want to keep this county and the people of Hopkins county safe."

Read more: [Louisville police investigating pop-up coronavirus testing sites for scams, officials say \(/story/news/2020/03/31/coronavirus-test-sites-operate-without-louisvilles-knowledge/5100299002/\)](#)

Kevin Cotton, mayor of Madisonville, the county seat, has also pleaded with residents to stay home.

"The church is not inside the building," Cotton said Monday. "The church is inside your heart. It's that relationship that you have."

On Wednesday, his pleas continued.

Standing in a government meeting room, Cotton presented viewers with a red plastic ball, representing a person infected with COVID-19.

He then showed how that person, by just interacting with a few other plastic balls, could quickly spread the virus through a community — dumping two full trash cans, each full to the brim with colorful plastic balls, on the meeting room floor.

"Please work with us, understand how important this is," he said.

"We are begging you."

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