COVID Exodus Fills Vacation Towns With New Medical Pressures

There is concern that the influx of hospital patients could overwhelm local resources.

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The staff at Stony Brook Southampton Hospital is accustomed to the number of patients tripling or even quadrupling each summer when wealthy Manhattanites flee the city for the Hamptons. But this year, the COVID pandemic has upended everything.

The 125-bed hospital on the southern coast of Long Island has seen a huge upswing in demand for obstetrics and delivery services. The pandemic has families who once planned to deliver babies in New York or other big cities migrating to the Hamptons for the near term.

From the shores of Long Island to the resorts of the Rocky Mountains, traditional vacation destinations have seen a major influx of affluent people relocating to wait out the pandemic. But now as summer vacation season has ended, many families realize that working from home and attending school online can be done anywhere they can tether to the internet, and those with means are increasingly waiting it out in the poshest destinations.

Many of the medical facilities in these getaway spots are used to seeing summer visitors for bug bites or tetanus shots, hiring an army of temporary doctors to get through the summer swells. Now they face the possibility of needing to treat much more serious medical conditions into the fall months — and for the foreseeable future.

Such increase in demand could strain or even overwhelm the more remote towns' hospitals and health care providers, threatening the availability of timely care for both the newcomers and the locals. The Southampton hospital has just seven intensive care unit beds, with the capacity to expand to as many as 30, but it wouldn't take much for the hospital to be swamped by patients.

"For health care, the bottom line is: As our population grows, we have to have the infrastructure to support it," said Tamara Pogue, CEO of Peak Health Alliance, a nonprofit community health insurance-purchasing cooperative in Colorado ski country.

And many communities do not.

Home Sales Soar

Sunny shores and mountain vistas are prompting people to relocate to second homes if they have them, or to purchase new homes in those areas if they don't. Renters who used to come for a month are now staying for two or three, and summer renters are becoming buyers. Multimillion-dollar residences in the ski resort town of Aspen, Colorado, for example, that once sat on the market for nearly a year now move in weeks.

"Some of the most experienced and seasoned real estate brokers have never seen activity like what we have experienced in July and August," said Tim Estin, a broker in Aspen, whose firm draws clients from COVID hot spots such as Dallas, Houston, New York, Miami, Los Angeles and Chicago.

Many destinations tried to discourage second-home owners from coming, particularly early in the pandemic after Colorado ski resorts became an epicenter of COVID cases. Gunnison County, Colorado, home to the Crested Butte ski resort, banned out-of-towners, prompting the Texas attorney general to take up the matter on behalf of Texans with homes in the area. In Lake Tahoe, along the California-Nevada border, second-home owners were told to go back to the Bay Area. And in New York vacation destinations, online messages targeted big-city transplants with classic New York aplomb.

The ski resort town of Vail, Colorado, on the other hand, welcomed them with open arms with its Welcome Home Neighbor campaign in May.

"We have long held the belief that in a resort community with so many second homes, that lights on are good, lights off are bad," said Chris Romer, president and CEO of the Vail Valley Partnership, the region's chamber of commerce.

Romer said the 56-bed Vail Health Hospital supported the campaign, particularly after visits to the town plummeted 90% in April once the ski lifts stopped running.

"We never would have launched the program if the hospital didn't sign off on it," Romer said.

Demand for Health Care

The influx of patients to these rural areas is helping hospitals and clinics rebound from the drop in typical patient visits during the pandemic, but there is concern that additional growth could overwhelm local resources. So far, though, enough people seem reluctant to seek care during the pandemic, unless it's an emergency or COVID-related, that it hasn't reached a tipping point. Others might be seeking care with their providers in the big city through telehealth or the occasional run back to their primary residence. But the mix of patients is different.

In Leadville, Colorado, a town nestled in the mountains at an altitude of 10,151 feet, summertime usually means an influx of mountain bikers and runners.

"Leadville has these crazy 100-mile races, where we have very elite athletes from all over the planet, and they have specific medical needs," said Lisa Zwerdlinger, MD, chief medical officer at

the local St. Vincent Hospital. “But what we’re seeing now are these second-home owners, people who are coming from other places to spend extended periods of time in Leadville and who come with a whole host of other medical issues.”

Most of the races this summer were canceled. That meant fewer extreme athletes and more Texans; fewer broken bones and turned ankles, and more chronic conditions exacerbated by the high altitude. Nonetheless, August was the busiest month ever at Zwerdlinger’s family medicine practice.

Hospitals in vacation towns typically prepare for surges during holidays, said Jason Cleckler, CEO of Middle Park Health, with locations serving Colorado’s Winter Park and Granby Ranch ski resorts in Grand County. During Christmas week, the population of neighboring Summit County, which houses resorts like Breckenridge and Keystone, swells from 31,000 to 250,000. But Cleckler said the COVID surge in resort communities is drawn-out so hospitals may have to respond with more permanent increases in capacity.

In Big Sky, Montana, whose part-time residents include Bill Gates and Justin Timberlake, Big Sky Medical Center doubled its capacity to eight beds in anticipation of a surge in patients due to COVID-19. The center’s two primary care doctors are completely booked. With so many new people in town, the hospital has accelerated plans to shift a third full-time doctor into the clinic.

As the wily coronavirus works its way into all corners of America, though, patients may find that not all regions have the same capacity to deal with COVID or even other complex medical problems.

Visitors to the sole clinic in nearby West Yellowstone, a gateway to the namesake national park, expect to be able to get COVID tests even if they have no symptoms or a known connection to a case, said Community Health Partners spokesperson Buck Taylor.

“There seems to be a frustration that a rural Montana clinic doesn’t have the resources they expect at home,” Taylor said. “That’s nothing new. People come to Montana all the time and say, ‘But where can I get any good Thai food?’”

Planning for What’s Next

The year has been such an outlier for hospitals that it’s difficult for them to predict and plan for what will happen next. On Long Island, many locals typically leave the Hamptons for Florida during the winter. But it’s unclear whether those snowbirds will stay or go this year, given the high levels of COVID-19 in Florida now, said Robert Chaloner, CEO of Stony Brook Southampton. That could also change the demand for who needs medical care.

One indication that some visitors may be staying put? The jump in new students. The Big Sky school district expects a 20% increase in enrollment this fall. Leadville schools have at least 40 new students. Vail Mountain School’s waiting list is its longest ever.

Many have speculated that the pandemic lockdown might fundamentally change the way companies operate, allowing more people to work from distant locations for the foreseeable future.

“Every indicator that I see is pointing to the fact that this is a shift,” said Romer in Vail. “It has the potential to be permanent.”

Taylor Rose, Big Sky Medical Center’s director of operations and clinical services, said that, if that happens, the hospital will have to rebalance its services.

“I’d probably give it a year or two before I make any major changes,” Rose said. “People are going to start deciding, ‘This really isn’t for me. I’m not going to stay here and deal with 6 feet of snow in the winter.’”

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