

## **Emergency medical transports rise along with COVID hospitalizations**

By Jackie Wang. [Published Aug. 27, 2021](#) for the San Antonio Report

Since the beginning of July, the delta variant's rapid spread has placed increasing pressure on San Antonio's emergency medical services, with the number of suspected COVID-19 patients transported to hospitals rising.

On July 1, city emergency services transported seven suspected COVID-19 patients. That number more than doubled by July 16, when EMS transported 16 suspected COVID-19 patients. From there, the total number of EMS transports continued to rise through Aug 12, the last day for which data was available.

On that day, the city of San Antonio experienced a 26-minute period where no EMS units were available to take calls, an extremely rare situation. San Antonio Fire Department spokesman Joe Arrington said that while total unavailability has happened — albeit rarely — in the past, it was “never for that long... typically no longer than a minute or two.”

The gap meant “we’re not transporting heart attacks, traffic accidents, or any sort of medical call,” said City Manager Erik Walsh at the time. “So it is critical. And what we’re doing is working with the hospitals to get our EMS units in and out of there as quickly as possible.” Fire Chief Charles Hood said the department has seen “record-breaking transportation numbers and responses during this third wave.”

In fiscal year 2020, the San Antonio Fire Department responded to 207,444 fire and medical incidents, Hood told City Council during a budget meeting on Aug. 25. The department projects that number will increase to a total of 226,112 calls this year, with nearly 80% of those being medical calls.

The San Antonio Report requested the number of EMS transports between July 1 and Aug. 12 and the number of coronavirus-related calls during that same period of time. [The graph below](#) shows the increase in such calls.

Arrington said from what he can see, the number of COVID-related calls has plateaued since mid-August.

However, he added, “COVID is definitely adding to our workload.”

The area's hospitals also continue to be inundated with COVID-19 patients, but San Antonio Metropolitan Health District Director Claude Jacob said Bexar County's coronavirus positivity rate and seven-day moving average have both improved.

“We just know that this is still an ongoing brushfire that we're trying to put out,” he told members of the City Council Community Health, Environment, and Culture Committee on Thursday. “With these numbers, we're definitely still in the middle of experiencing our third major wave of this pandemic.”

On Thursday, 1,365 were hospitalized for COVID-19 in Bexar County, a dip from 1,466 just three days before. The area recorded a high of 1,520 hospitalizations in January.

Jacob warned that the drop wasn't enough to relax any vigilance.

“Our hospitalization numbers continue to be alarming,” he said. “Keep in mind that there was no vaccination that was in existence for those previous waves. ... It's a testament to how well the vaccines work in preventing hospitalizations and deaths among those infected.”

There were only about 300 available staffed hospital beds as of Wednesday, Jacob said.

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## Texas attorney general sues SAISD over vaccine mandate

By Jackie Wang. [Published Aug. 19, 2021](#) for the San Antonio Report.

Attorney General Ken Paxton sued the San Antonio Independent School District on Thursday over its vaccination mandate for staff.

SAISD Superintendent Pedro Martinez issued a mask mandate for all students and staff [on Monday](#), after a state district judge handed down [a temporary order](#) allowing San Antonio and Bexar County to require masks in city- and county-owned buildings as well as in public schools. Martinez also issued a vaccine mandate for district staff members, going a step further than the order and other school districts.

SAISD is the third-largest district in the county, with about 46,000 students enrolled. More than 90% of the staff have already received the coronavirus vaccine, but the deadline for those who have not is Oct. 15.

Paxton filed [his lawsuit against SAISD in Bexar County](#). In his request for a temporary restraining order barring SAISD from requiring vaccines, he said Martinez and the school district were “deliberately violating state law,” as [a July executive order](#) from Gov. Greg Abbott prohibits any entity that receives public funds from mandating COVID-19 vaccines.

“The Texas Legislature made the Governor — not some patchwork of county judges, city mayors, or superintendents — the leader of the State’s response to and recovery from a statewide emergency,” Paxton wrote, referring to cities, counties, and school districts around Texas [that have defied the executive order](#) in some way.

Bexar County and San Antonio first sued the governor [on Aug. 10](#) over his prohibition of mask mandates. Immediately after they secured a temporary injunction that allowed them to require masks in city and county buildings and in schools, Paxton [filed an appeal](#) with the 4th Court of Appeals; that court has not taken action yet.

Paxton [has made clear](#) that he is watching school districts that are “noncompliant” with the governor’s executive order and requiring masks in schools, posting a list of more than 50 school districts including San Antonio, North East, Lackland, Judson, Harlandale, Edgewood, and Fort Sam Houston ISDs.

Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff praised SAISD’s vaccine mandate, calling Martinez “a hero, because he tried to protect children.”

“The attorney general sued him today; that’s a badge of honor as far as I’m concerned,” Wolff said. “I want to thank him for mandating masks and for requiring vaccinations.”

SAISD said it could not comment on the lawsuit itself, citing “pending litigation.”

“Separate from that, it is our state and federal responsibility to protect children in our charge, and we will continue to act in the best interests of our students, families and community,” the school district said in a statement. “We will continue to adhere to the directives from our local health authority and guidance from the CDC in order to be the most responsive to what our immediate community is demanding and expecting from us.”

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## **‘Pandemic Lotería’ a Sellout Success for Self-Taught San Antonio Artist**

By Jackie Wang. [Published May 31, 2020](#) for the San Antonio Report

Less than a month after San Antonio artist Rafael Gonzales Jr. started selling his Pandemic Lotería game, a local store picked it up and saw it rocket to the top of its best-selling items.

Gonzales posted his first pandemic-themed lotería card on Instagram [at the end of March](#). Titled “La CabRONA,” the card depicting the coronavirus gives a new meaning to [the Spanish insult](#). He designed more cards for the bingo-like game and started shipping games to customers who ordered directly from him in early May. After that first run, Gonzales said it was too hard to keep up. He and his wife were sorting cards, packaging the game, and shipping to customers all on their own.

“We sold 800 units in two days,” he said. “The initial run was only supposed to be 1,000. I had to cap off that preorder around 850, and we stopped there.”

To get help, Gonzales turned to Ginger Diaz, owner of the arts and gifts store Feliz Modern, whom he knew from a prior collaboration when he and his wife ran a pop-up hot chocolate shop out of the store. He told Diaz he had about 150 lotería games left and asked her if she’d like to sell them in her store.

“She sold them out in like two hours,” he said.

Now, Feliz Modern is restocking the full game for customers for the fourth time, Diaz said. With locations in Olmos Park and the Pearl, the store is currently open by appointment only.

Between Wednesday and Thursday, Feliz Modern sold nearly 500 units of the game, she said. Previously, the store’s best-selling item was a cloth face mask featuring comic-book-style censorship symbols. Now, the Pandemic Lotería has outsold it twice over, she said. Feliz Modern has sold 600 of those masks, and 1,300 of the Pandemic Lotería.

She thinks the demand comes not only from the topical nature of the game, but for the ease of bringing people together to play it.

“It’s just like, ‘My aunt/my uncle/my cousin will love this,’” Diaz said. “It’s who they’re buying it for and who they want to play it with. It’s about connection. Anyone can play it at any age, and you can play it remotely or together.”

Gonzales was stunned by the demand for his project. He started designing pandemic-themed lotería cards as a creative outlet, he said.

“I was watching the news more, going through that shared experience of gathering all that information, and getting used to our new normal,” he said.

The [Pandemic Lotería](#) features 37 cards putting a spin on the traditional game. Cards include [“El Fauci”](#) with Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases; [“La Coping Mechanism,”](#) featuring an image of a cocktail; and “La Sirena,” one of Gonzales’s favorites. The card shows a [can of tuna](#), a nod to people stocking up on groceries to prepare for the pandemic. The traditional lotería card for “La Sirena” features a mermaid.

“The imagery there is funny to me and it’s representative of my humor and what I was trying to portray with this project,” Gonzales said.

Though Gonzales didn’t grow up playing lotería, the project feels more personal when thinking of his wife’s family, he said.

“She comes from a family of, like, five aunts and an uncle,” he said. “They have all gotten together every Saturday since I’ve known them at every family function and play a game of lotería.”

The project also brought together local makers during the coronavirus pandemic, Gonzales said. He worked with [Pride Printing SA](#) to manufacture the lotería cards and tablas, the board that players use to mark image matches as they are called out during the game. He felt it was important to partner with a small local business for his project, Gonzales said.

“Initially when we were just going back and forth and getting everything print-ready, [Pride Printing SA owner Mike Martinez] was so excited about the project and loved what I was doing. ... Mike took it personally, and I know his team has worked really hard to get it all done,” he said. “I feel like this lotería project, in general, is rooted in community.”

A San Antonio native, Gonzales has degrees in biology and religious studies, but never formally studied art, he said. He spent the past few years teaching himself graphic design. His father instilled an appreciation for art early in his life, Gonzales said.

“My dad drew a lot,” Gonzales said. “He liked painting things. Even though he never stepped foot in our church, he would be responsible for the sets for Christmas plays and that sort of thing. He was always painting things and doing projects.”

Even though his Pandemic Lotería took off, Gonzales said he doesn’t anticipate taking his art full time. He likes his job at the University of Incarnate Word, where he works as the compliance officer and lab manager for the pharmacy school. But he has been able to give more time to graphic design with other side projects after the lotería’s success.

“That’s been nice, too, to do other graphic design work,” he said. “I would really like to have more of those opportunities, away from the university. But, yeah, in my near future I don’t see myself devoted full time to this.”

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## **Jimmy Kimmel, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz face off in the 'worst basketball game ever'**

By Jackie Wang. [Published June 16, 2018](#) for the Dallas Morning News.

HOUSTON — Jimmy Kimmel predicted it would be "the worst basketball game ever." He may have been right.

Hundreds of fans watched what can only be described as some really bad basketball Saturday at Texas Southern University as late-night host Kimmel faced Sen. Ted Cruz in the Blobfish Basketball Classic. After about 80 minutes, Cruz finally won 11-9.

They were supposed to play to 15, but after 40 minutes, Kimmel and Cruz agreed to make it a little easier.

"In the spirit of bipartisanship, we're going to shorten the game to 11 [points]," Kimmel told the cheering crowd.

The game between Cruz and Kimmel has been in the works ever since the late-night host compared the senator to the famously unattractive blobfish in May.

Kimmel said he carbo-loaded to prepare for the Blobfish Basketball Classic. He practiced a little, but after 25 years of not playing basketball regularly, the host said he decided to "wing it." As the loser, Kimmel pledged after the game to double his donation to Generation One to \$10,000. Cruz also pledged \$10,000 to Kimmel's charity, Texas Children's Hospital. When setting the rules, each player chose an organization with the agreement that the loser would donate \$5,000 to the winner's charity of choice.

Generation One is a Houston-based education nonprofit, and Kimmel chose Texas Children's because his 1-year-old son, Billy, has had three heart surgeries and is waiting on a fourth. According to Kimmel's Facebook page, fans of the show have already donated over \$13,000 to the hospital.

During the game, Cruz and Kimmel had brief discussions about detention centers and Cruz's support for President Donald Trump. Kimmel asked Cruz why he didn't support covering pre-existing conditions, and booing from the decidedly pro-Kimmel crowd drowned out the senator's answer.

"I feel like this is the closest we're going to get to a town hall," Kimmel said.

Cruz and Kimmel missed more than 100 shots between them during the game. Toward the end, Cruz's shirt had darkened a few shades from his sweat. Courtside helpers had to wipe the floor a few times because both players were sweating profusely. Cruz joked afterward that they also set the Guinness World Record for fouls.

At the end, Kimmel couldn't resist one more jab.

"Ted, you're a good sport," he said. "I still think you're a terrible senator."

"Kids, at least you got to see your daddy win something," he added to Cruz's daughters, who joined Cruz and his wife, Heidi, on the court.

Before the game, Kimmel laid on the blobfish smack talk extra thick while talking to reporters.

"Ted was born, and his face looked just like a blobfish," he said. "Then he became an adult, and his face became even more like a blobfish. He became this human blobfish and I pointed that out, and I didn't know it would be news to him. I assumed throughout his life people had pointed this out. And apparently he didn't like it so he challenged me to a one-on-one basketball game, and here we are."

Kimmel also poked fun at Cruz's supposed unlikability among his colleagues.

"I know he's not very well-liked among Republicans, among Democrats," he said. "In fact, I think the reason I'm playing this game is because he couldn't find anyone else to play basketball with. So, I'm here to fill a little hole in his heart."

Cruz teased Kimmel earlier Saturday, tweeting a video of him thanking former Duke basketball player (and some say, Cruz lookalike) Grayson Allen for agreeing to sub in for him.

"I cannot wait to see you dunk on Jimmy Kimmel," Cruz told him.

"I don't think you need me," Allen responded. "You got this."

Kimmel told *The Dallas Morning News* if he could choose something other than basketball, he'd definitely challenge Cruz to a game of Scrabble. He also shared his thoughts on a few other topics (answers have been edited and condensed for clarity):

### **On health care in America**

"The idea that our senators and our Congress people would work to thwart something that the vast majority of Americans support shows you who they care about, who their constituents really are. Not the people who vote, they're the people who pay them.

"I think that 78 percent, 80 percent of Americans believe that people with pre-existing conditions should be covered by health insurance, and Ted Cruz is not one of those people. and that makes no sense to me. Why anyone would vote for somebody who supports business instead of Americans is — I don't understand it."

### **On launching a political career**

"I would never run for office. I think I'm more effective as an outsider, sharing my thoughts."

### **On asking Cruz about his support of separating families at the border**

"We will have some substantive questions during the course of the game. That is something I'd like to take up with him."

### **On his favorite part of Texas**

“I love the food in Texas. I love Tex-Mex, I love smoked beef. I’ve spent a lot of time in this state eating and every time I leave I have to have my pants let out two inches.”

### **How his sidekick Guillermo will help in tonight’s game**

“[Retired Houston Rockets player] Ralph Sampson is my coach. Guillermo will be my support system. And in case we run out of balls, we will use Guillermo as the ball.”

### **On his approach to the game**

“The game plan is to play tight defense, miss a lot of shots. I have a feeling this game is going to take a lot longer than it should. It’s to 15 [points] — we’ll see if we get there.”

*Jimmy Kimmel Live* will air the Blobfish Basketball Classic on Monday night.

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## **Federal judge temporarily blocks Texas law requiring burial of fetal remains**

By Jackie Wang. [Published Jan. 29, 2018](#) for the Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN — A federal judge on Monday blocked a controversial state law that requires miscarried or aborted fetuses to be cremated or buried.

U.S. District Court Judge David Ezra of San Antonio issued a preliminary injunction that bars Texas officials from carrying out the law, which would have taken effect Thursday.

The case grew out of an earlier lawsuit, brought by the Center for Reproductive Rights on behalf of Whole Woman's Health and other abortion providers, to challenge a regulation from the Department of State Health Services that said fetal remains must be buried.

A year ago, U.S. District Court Judge Sam Sparks of Austin blocked the department's fetal remains rule from taking effect. But in May, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 8, which includes a requirement that fetal tissue be buried, cremated or incinerated. Ashes cannot be put into a landfill. The law does not apply to miscarriages and abortions that occur outside a medical facility.

Last month, Sparks transferred the case to Ezra, and this month, the case returned to trial court.

Ezra temporarily blocked the law to preserve the status quo, which was established under rules in place since 1989. Those rules allow for the burial of fetal tissue but also for it to be disposed of the same way as other human tissue or pathological waste — incinerated, ground or disinfected and deposited in a sanitary landfill or sewer system. Most facilities that offer abortion services contract with vendors and opt for incineration.

Proponents of the law say it allows the state to ensure fetuses are not treated like other medical waste. Joe Pojman, executive director of Texas Alliance for Life, said if the law goes into effect, it won't change how many women have abortions. But plaintiffs argue the law would increase the cost of abortion, making it less accessible for women.

Pojman said he thinks the law has a good chance of being upheld, despite Monday's preliminary injunction.

"The federal courts in Austin typically do not uphold the laws regarding abortion passed by the Legislature, but we do have very good track record of these laws being sustained by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals," Pojman said.

Amy Hagstrom Miller, president and chief executive of lead plaintiff Whole Woman's Health, called the preliminary injunction a "win" and said it's what's best for Texans.

"Texans deserve better and today we got that," Miller said in a prepared statement. "The legislature's relentless attacks on access to reproductive health care prevent women from getting the care that they need. These attacks continue to be dangerous and wrong. Today's decision is a strong affirmation of what we have always fought for — that women deserve to have the dignity when making health care decisions."

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton said he would continue to fight for the burial mandate.

"Texas values the dignity of the remains of the unborn and believes that fetal tissue should be disposed of properly and humanely," Paxton said in a news release. "My office will continue to fight to uphold the constitutionality of the new law, which simply prevents fetal remains from being treated as medical waste."

Both the plaintiffs and state have 10 days to submit proposed trial dates.