

President Grants New York Governor's Request for Hospital Ship Comfort to Take COVID-19 Patients



U.S. Marines walk along Pier 90 in New York City as part of a security detachment supporting the Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Comfort. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Adelola Tinubu

ARLINGTON, Va. – The governor of New York, the state hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, wants the hospital ship USNS Comfort to switch missions and accept patients with the novel coronavirus ahead of an anticipated spike in infections and deaths.

At his daily news conference April 6 in Albany, N.Y., broadcast by numerous news outlets, Cuomo said he would call on President Trump to direct the 1,000-bed Medical Treatment

Facility on board the USNS Comfort to start treating COVID-19 patients. Trump later granted Cuomo's request. A crew member on the hospital ship later tested positive for the virus, several media outlets reported.

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[See: Coast Guard Oversees Disembarkation of Cruise Passengers](#)

The Comfort and the USNS Mercy, which was sent to help another overburdened medical system in Los Angeles, were designated as referral hospitals for non-COVID 19 patients, to allow local health professionals and hospitals to focus their attention and equipment, like intensive care units and ventilators, on COVID-19 patients.

However, the Comfort, docked in the Hudson River, has seen only a handful of non-COVID patients. Noting mandatory stay-at-home orders in the state, which have reduced auto accidents, crime and other activities that might require a trip to the hospital in ordinary times. "We don't need the Comfort for non-COVID," Cuomo said, "we need it for COVID."



The patient transport team prepares to receive a patient aboard the hospital ship USNS Comfort while the ship is moored in New York. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Sara Eshleman

President Trump raised the issue April 5 at a coronavirus task force briefing at the White House. While the ship's mission wasn't supposed to be for virus treatment "at all," Trump said, "It looks like more and more we'll be using it for that."

New York State has been the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States with 130,689 cases and 4,758 deaths. The 800-foot-long Comfort, a converted oil supertanker, can provide a range of services such as general surgeries, critical care and ward care for adults. The ship wasn't accepting obstetrics or pediatric cases, for which it had no specialists or equipment. Walk-in patients weren't permitted, and ambulances couldn't take patients directly to the Comfort. Patients first had to be transported to a city hospital for evaluation, including testing for COVID-19 before they could be transported to the ship.

Pentagon officials announced April 3 that screening for care on the USNS Comfort was being modified and will occur pier-side to reduce the backlog at some of the nearby New York hospitals. The screening effort for the Comfort no longer would require a negative test, but each patient still will be screened by temperature and a short questionnaire. The Pentagon also announced that the 2,500-bed non-COVID facility set up in New York's Javits Convention Center would start taking COVID-19 positive patients.

Capt. Patrick Amersbach, the USNS Comfort's medical commander, told reporters in a teleconference April 2 that if the mission changed, all the Comfort's beds would have to be reconfigured to keep those with the virus far apart from those not infected.

"We understand that introducing COVID-19 positive patients into the FMS environments elevates the risk of transmission to other patients and our medical providers. This decision was risk-informed and made to ensure that DoD can continue to provide these local communities the type of medical care they most need. Force health protection is a top priority and our medical professionals will have the required personal protective equipment needed for this mission," the Defense Department announcement said.

The shipboard coronavirus relief operation in both New York and Los Angeles is led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in coordination with U.S. Northern Command, Military Sealift Command and the U.S. Navy.