

Gov. Greg Abbott, meeting with leaders in Texas's sprawling Gulf Coast region to discuss his Covid-19 strategy, strongly suggested Tuesday that hospitalizations and cases from the virus remained far too high to allow a swift relaxation of business closures and other restrictions.

The Republican governor, who traveled to Beaumont and Victoria, cited signs of progress but indicated Texas still had a long way to go in overcoming a relentless surge that made it one of the nation's leading hot spots in the pandemic. For the past week, Texas added an average of about 7,560 cases per day, compared to a peak seven-day average of over 10,000 cases per day in mid-July.

Mr. Abbott has set a 10 percent positive test rate as a fundamental goal in countering the coronavirus. Positive rates should be at or below 5 percent for at least 14 days before a state or country can safely reopen, according to the World Health Organization. And despite a falling rate of hospitalization — 7,200 now, down from a late-July high of around 11,000, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services — hospitals remained overburdened, Mr. Abbott said at a news conference during his first stop at Beaumont.

“The most important thing I can convey today is that even though the numbers of Covid-19 have improved,” he said, “Covid-19 has not left Jefferson County, has not left Orange County, has not left the State of Texas.”

Although Mr. Abbott said he understood the hardships faced by those struggling “to pay the rent, to put food on the table,” he strongly signaled that he planned to stay the course with his current policies until the pandemic was solidly under control, noting that the virus began to surge after an initial round of reopenings.

“We have to be vigilant right now to be sure that we continue to slow the spread of Covid-19,” Mr. Abbott said. Reopenings could be possible, he said, “if we're able to get to a positive rate of well below 10 percent and maintain that positivity rate.”

Texas school districts have been given flexibility to call their own shots on when and how to reopen amid the pandemic, including whether or not to allow in-person instruction, virtual online learning or a combination of both. School districts can choose their own opening date and will also be allowed to close a school or even a classroom in the event of an outbreak, he said.