

Dr. Marjorie Bessel - Virtual press conference opening remarks 1.06.21

As you are probably aware, Banner operates in six states. Most of our markets have seen a decline in COVID-19 cases, positivity rates and hospitalizations in recent weeks. Arizona has not, and for this reason my remarks today will focus on this market where we continue to see an increase in cases, positivity rate, hospitalizations, patients on ventilators and deaths.

According to the CDC tracker, this week Arizona surpassed all other states with the highest rate of new COVID-19 infections. Johns Hopkins University data shows that Arizona has the highest number of COVID-19 cases per day in the world when normalized by population. Our COVID-19 7-day average positivity rate is now 25%. That means that 1 in 4 Arizonans who are tested for the virus are confirmed positive for COVID-19.

As I have shared with you before, positive tests are a leading indicator of the prevalence of COVID-19 in our community. They show us what we can expect to see in our hospitals in the next 10 to 14 days. That said, we are just now starting to see the effects of Christmas holiday gatherings here in our hospitals, and don't anticipate seeing the spike in cases due to the New Year's holiday for another one to two weeks.

I don't need to tell you that this is beyond concerning. Hospitals in the state of Arizona are stretched very thin right now despite a considerable amount of preparation and work to increase capacity.

Since the start of the pandemic, Banner has evaluated nearly 150,000 hospital patients for COVID-like illness. About a third of those patients were confirmed COVID-positive. Since March of last year, we have hospitalized roughly 25,000 patients with COVID-19. Of those who were hospitalized, 3,335 were put on ventilators and remained on those ventilators for an average of 11 days. Remember that a typical ICU patient is only ventilated for 3 to 4 days. In addition, about 20% of COVID patients in our ICUs require dialysis, and this is stressing our dialysis resources, with some hospitals over 100% of their dialysis capacity in the ICU.

Banner hospitals continue to care for roughly half of all the COVID-19 patients in Arizona. Our occupancy remains above 100% of our licensed bed capacity, and we continue to add beds wherever we can. We have canceled elective surgeries at all Banner hospitals in Arizona. We continue to train our non-ICU staff so that they can serve as helping hands in our COVID-19 units, providing much-needed support for our ICU nurses who are caring for more patients than they would typically care for in a non-COVID environment. And remember, COVID-19 patients also require much more attention and care than a typical ICU patient. Currently, our ICU occupancy is 70% higher than it was at the same time last year.

Recruitment for external contract labor is ongoing and our corporate team members continue redeployments to help those on the frontlines. I myself am redeploying as well as my colleagues on Banner's senior leadership team. Daily, even multiple times per day, we are transferring staff, equipment and patients between hospitals to ensure that no one hospital is overwhelmed. We are even bringing some of those resources from our other Banner markets like Colorado and Wyoming. We are doing all this while also operating three Arizona vaccination sites. These sites require hundreds of staff and volunteers each day.

We remain open to everyone who needs care and have not activated the triage addendum of the Arizona Crisis Standards of Care plan, but that doesn't mean that care is the same as it would be in a non-COVID environment.

Visitors are not permitted with few exceptions. Patients will experience longer wait times. They may need to be transferred to a different hospital further away from their homes. They will not receive needed surgeries unless those surgeries qualify as urgent or emergent. The current state of care in our hospitals cannot be defined as usual and customary. It is stretching us to our limits, and our predictive models indicate that it will only get worse.

We need more mitigation, more enforcement and more personal commitment from Arizonans to reduce the spread of

COVID-19. This means implementing additional measures like a statewide mask mandate, a curfew, stopping indoor dining, canceling large gatherings like the Phoenix Open and adhering to a bi-directional roadmap for the opening and closing of businesses based on science and data. It also means that those rules must be enforced. As an example of lack of enforcement, it has been recently reported that no one has been cited for violating mask mandates in Arizona's big cities, yet we have all seen mask-less individuals in our communities who exhibit reckless disregard for the lives and well-being of others during a time when we are experiencing uncontrolled spread of this deadly virus.

In addition to those required mitigation actions by our governor, mayors, county supervisors and city councils, and along with the needed enforcement of those rules, we implore all of you to do the right thing. Do your part to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Shrink your circle to only those you live. Wear a mask around all others outside of your small circle. Stop attending unmasked gatherings even if you feel well. It is very likely that someone at those gatherings has the virus, and they are spreading it to you. COVID-19 is highly contagious and can be transmitted to others even if you are experiencing no symptoms.

I ask for these things every week and I will continue to ask for them. Now is the time, Arizona. We need every one of you to do your part so that hospitals can remain open and accessible for all those in need of health care.

Those of us who work in health care got into this profession to save lives. Please do not put us in the position to ration care. Please do not make us decide who will get life-saving resources and who will not. The choices you make in the days and weeks to come are truly life or death. Maybe not your own, but perhaps one of your loved ones, a friend or a neighbor. We can prevent this. You can prevent this.

- *FOR MEDIA: Please attribute any direct quotes used from this script to Marjorie Bessel, MD, Banner Health Chief Clinical Officer*