

Thank you Dr. Bessel. At this time, I'll read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. The first question is from Barbara Via at Arizona News Radio. Her question is, talk about the Biden COVID plan and what it will do for Arizona.

So the plan that is coming from President Biden continues to, obviously, develop each and every day. Certainly, in my opening comments, it is very important for us to continue to vaccinate, to vaccinate as quickly as possible, and to really take care of those that are in the most vulnerable age populations. It is my sincere hope that as that plan continues to roll out, more vaccine will come to Arizona, we will be able to open up additional vaccination sites, and we will continue to work through the different tiers, making sure that we're taking care of those populations that are most at risk from the severe complications of COVID-19.

OK, the next question is from Nicole Luddin at Tucson Local Media. Her question is, Pima County's mandatory curfew has been halted by a preliminary injunction ordered by the courts. What are your thoughts on this? And do you believe curfews are an effective way to slow the spread of COVID-19?

So again, as we are beginning to see, we are starting to have a decline in cases. And we do know that mitigation, enforcement, and personal accountability absolutely does work. Pima cases have absolutely been improved by some of those efforts. At this time, as the curfew may no longer be able to be in place, I would just ask all of you to take personal accountability. Please shrink your circles, wear your mask, and when it's time for you to get vaccinated, please go and do so. That will help us keep cases down, hospitalizations down, ICU stays down, and ultimately, result in fewer deaths.

OK, the next question is two parts. So I'll ask the first, and then the follow up. It's from Griselda Zetino at KTAR News. Her first question is, can you repeat when elective surgeries will partially resume again?

Yes. So because of the downward trends that we're seeing in cases and hospitalizations, we have made the decision to partially resume elective surgeries at Banner hospitals on January 25th. Please keep in mind that those surgeries will be evaluated hospital by hospital, and will also include only partial resumption of surgeries. The surgeries that will go forward will be those that do not require more than a one-day stay, do not require ICU care, and those surgeries that are outpatient only.

As a reminder, please remember that all of these surgeries that have been postponed are medically necessary surgeries. And we know that by getting these surgeries back into place, we also will help take care of those patients who need them, hopefully avoiding them becoming an emergent case needing to come through the ED, having to have a longer hospital stay.

OK, her second question-- you answered the first part of it, which was, which surgeries will be allowed to resume. And you had referenced outpatient and those with a one-night stay or less and no ICU care. The second part of that question is, will all Banner hospitals in Arizona be able to partially resume surgeries?

So at this time, we've made the system decision that every Banner Arizona hospital may proceed. However, each individual hospital will be making their own decision based on a number of different

factors, including what their overall capacity is in their hospital and what their staffing looks like. So we'll ask everybody who's out there who may have had their surgery delayed, please be in touch with your surgeon, who will be in touch with their hospital as we make these decisions. This is often a day-by-day decision, again, weighing in all of the factors, trying to take care of the most number of people that we possibly can.

OK, next question is from Nicole Garcia at Fox 10. Is Banner still using refrigerated trucks to increase more capacity? Can you describe the mortality rate compared to the summer surge?

Yes, so our morgue census does remain very high. We are using our refrigerated trucks at this time, which are centrally located. Those patients who have died at outside hospitals within the Banner system may be transported to that central location. Currently, 58% of those that are being transported to us are COVID positive.

As far as the death rate from this surge, that is a very difficult question to answer because the death rate from a surge lags from the surge. So as I indicated, the peak for Banner hospitals was on January 15th. And so we really will not be able to compare the mortality rate from this surge to the mortality rate from the summer for another couple of weeks. We can bring that information in one of our future press conferences.

OK, next question is from Erasmus Baxter at Phoenix New Times. His question is, to what extent is the reduction in hospital occupancy a result of COVID-19 patients passing on?

That, I don't have those exact statistics right here in front of me. And as I said in my closing remarks here, we certainly mourn each and every Arizonan who has lost their life to COVID-19. We do believe that the reduction in our cases that we're having in our hospitals across all of Banner is a reduction related to a decrease in the overall viral transmission in our communities.

We can bring some future statistics to a press conference. But I do not believe that it is only related to those that have passed away, but truly also related to a reduction of the total number of cases and the burden that Arizona is experiencing with COVID-19 at this time.

OK, next question is from Chris [INAUDIBLE] at 3TV CBS-5. Did Banner hospitals in Arizona experience a spike in COVID-19 deaths in recent days or weeks?

So Banner hospitals in the state of Arizona did experience a peak of cases and a surge of cases going back to post-Thanksgiving holidays and then post-Christmas holidays. A reduction has just been now for less than one week, related we believe, to just a complete overall reduction of COVID-19 transmission within our communities.

We certainly do expect, as I said in my opening comments, for the decline of the surge to take many, many, many weeks to come. We certainly hope that continued vaccination will help accelerate that decline. But as always, personal accountability, shrinking our circles, and wearing an appropriate mask will help us reduce the transmission of the virus within our communities and therefore reduce the number of hospitalizations within our hospitals.

OK, next question is from Terry Tang at the Associated Press. And she has a two-part question. I'll ask the first question. It is, are we done seeing cases that stem from travel around New Year's?

So given where we are now, three weeks post-New Year's, we do believe that this downward trend is likely going to continue. So again, we did have quite a significant surge post-Thanksgiving, and quite a significant surge post-Christmas. We would ask all of you to continue to please do your part, wear your mask, shrink your circle, and when it's your time, get vaccinated.

OK, second question is, are you afraid news about the dip in hospitalizations and cases will lead to some people feeling complacent?

So I did start my comments here today that, it is one of the first press conferences in several weeks where we had some good news. But it is important to make sure that the good news is also taken within the context of the fact that we still have uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 within our communities here in the state of Arizona.

It is incredibly important for all of us to maintain vigilance around wearing our masks appropriately, completely over our nose and mouth, shrinking our circles, and getting vaccinated when it's our time.

OK, next question is from Colleen Sikora at 12 News. Dr. Bessel, you talk about how you anticipate not reaching pre-surge levels for another 10 to 11 weeks. We've heard this referred to as a plateau by a couple other clinical officers. Being at such high levels of treating COVID positive patients, what does that look like inside the walls of the Banner hospitals as this trend plays out over the coming weeks?

So again, you know, it is the first time in many weeks that I've started my opening comments with some positive news. And so we are very pleased to have some reduction in our hospitalizations. It does require us, however, to remain vigilant because there is a lot of uncontrolled spread still within our communities. Within our hospitals, we are very, very busy. And yet, it is our absolute desire to continue to care for as many people as we possibly can, and to save as many lives as we can.

That is why we are beginning to resume those elective surgeries, which are medically necessary procedures. So our hospitals will look a little bit different as we move forward to do some of those surgical procedures for patients that have already been waiting more than three weeks to have their procedure done.

The hospitals will continue to adjust the plans based on total capacity, ICU capacity, and staffing so that we can take care of all of the needs in our communities, both COVID and non-COVID. But our hospitals are still very busy.

OK, we have a couple of questions from Craig Smith at KGUN TV. I'll ask the first one. Do you have any concerns-- I'm sorry, my attestation just popped up. So we have to verify that we have no health symptoms that would suggest a respiratory illness. I just closed that out. My question for you is, do you have any concerns that you will be unable to give second doses of the vaccine?

So at Banner Health, where we are vaccinating, our process, which we believe is a best practice, is when an individual has made their appointment and they show up for their first vaccine, we are scheduling them at that appropriate interval-- 21 days for Pfizer, we will do 28 days for Moderna-- for that second appointment. As long as the vaccine continues to be provided to the state of Arizona, to the counties, and ultimately to where Banner vaccinates, we will continue, of course, to provide those second vaccinations to those individuals that have received their first vaccination.

OK, second question from Craig is, if appointments are no-shows, what happens to vaccines set aside for them?

So, thank you, we really ask everybody out there who has an appointment to get vaccinated to please show up for your appointment. If you are unable to show up for your appointment, please go ahead and cancel it. As we all know, this vaccine needs to be handled very well. It's got a lot of cold chain storage. And when you have an appointment, there is actually a vaccine literally allocated to you. Within our pods, we are absolutely committed, however, to not waste any vaccine. So at the end of the day, we have a process, so that if we have no-shows, to make sure that no vaccine goes wasted. For some pods, we have a wait list of individuals who are appropriate to receive vaccine, and we call those individuals as we get towards the end of the day to see if they're available to quickly come in and get that vaccine.

In addition to that, like so many other pods, for those volunteers who are taking time out of their lives to come and help vaccinate, they also have an opportunity at the end of the day, if there's vaccine left over, to receive a vaccine at our pod. In this fashion, no vaccine ever goes wasted at our pods at the end of the day.

OK. Next question is from Griselda Zetino at KTAR. Are Banner hospitals using monoclonal to treat COVID-19 patients?

Yes. At Banner, we have a number of different ways and different sites where monoclonal antibody is being provided to patients that have COVID-19. I do want to make sure, however, that everybody understands that monoclonal antibody treatment is for patients who are COVID-19 positive, have symptoms, and meet certain other criteria. This is given as an outpatient treatment for those that qualify in several different sites. If you would like more additional information, please go to Bannerhealth.com.

Next question is from Stephanie Innes at the Arizona Republic. Bars, restaurants, and gyms remain open in Arizona. Do you have any recommendations for whether or not Arizonans should be frequenting these businesses at this point in the pandemic?

So at this point in the pandemic, despite the fact that I did open up with some positive remarks, and that we are seeing a reduction in hospitalizations, which is all great news, within the state of Arizona we still have a lot of COVID-19 virus, and we are still considered to have widespread, uncontrolled viral spread. With that, if you look at the literature, we know that mitigation, enforcement, and personal accountability works.

When you go out, outside of your place with those that you live with, you are absolutely increasing your risk of both potentially spreading virus because you could be asymptomatic, as well as getting the virus, becoming infected, and possibly becoming symptomatic. So at this time, all of us should continue to mask up, and we should shrink our circles and limit the amount of activity that we're doing out in our communities to continue to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

OK. Barbara Villa at Arizona News Radio asks, there's a lot of talk about vaccine shortages. How serious is the problem in our state?

So vaccine shortage is a very serious problem across the entire United States. At this time, we do have limited vaccine available, which is why within the state, within the counties, and within the vaccination sites we are following a prescriptive tiering of going through those individuals that are most needed to get vaccinated for essential services and those that are most needed to get vaccinated because they are the most vulnerable and most likely to be hospitalized, be in our ICUs, or ultimately suffer mortality from this disease.

It's a significant issue that we do not have enough vaccine to meet the demand necessary. We don't have enough vaccine to meet the demand of the tiers that we already have in play. And we certainly don't have enough vaccine at this time to reach herd immunity. As we continue to receive additional vaccine, and as the federal program continues to hopefully be augmented, that will all have benefit to us here in Arizona, to our counties, and to those sites that are providing vaccine. As I said in my opening comments, I continue to recommend that everybody go to the AZDHS site and to your county websites to get the most up-to-date information about vaccine availability near you.

OK, next question is from Colleen Sikora at 12 News. Her question is, are you anticipating any future surges in the spring?

So as I stated in my opening comments, there are three new variants of the COVID-19 virus that are out there-- the UK variant, the South African variant, and the Brazil variant. At this time, only the UK variant has been documented to be here in the United States, and its transmissibility is significantly increased compared to the current predominant strain here in the United States. That could be a concern for spring.

What we ask everybody to do is just to continue to mitigate, enforce, and take your own personal accountability. That will help reduce the spread of whichever variant is out there and to also get vaccinated or help those that are having difficulty, like the elderly or those who don't have internet, to get vaccinated when it's your time. At this time, we do believe that the vaccine is absolutely effective against the UK variant. And continued vaccine will help us reduce the spread and hopefully reduce the likelihood of a spring surge.

OK, next question is from Craig Smith at KGUN. Craig asks, so a second dose is dependent on continued supply. Is that correct?

The second dose is definitely contingent about supply, as is first dose. So again, I would ask everybody to please get vaccinated when it's your turn, help those that are elderly or without internet

to get their vaccine appointments, and stay connected through social channels, as well as AZDHS website and the county website for continued updated information.

OK, the next question is from Amanda Morris at the Arizona Republic. It seems as though it's easier to get vaccination appointments online than over the phone. Are there plans to ensure equitable access to vaccine appointments for communities without internet access? And if so, what are those plans?

So yes, thank you for that question. And we are aware that it is difficult, especially for some populations to schedule appointments. Sometimes it's difficult for them to schedule appointments online. And certainly it would be very difficult if you do not have internet access. Please refer, if you can, to the information sites that are available at the state, the county, and other vaccination information sites. There are phone appointments that are available. There are phone hotlines that are available, both at the state and the county levels. And we also, within Banner, are answering phone calls and attempting to assist individuals to get appointments when it is their appropriate time.

OK, next question is from Krista Allen with Navajo Times. The Arizona interscholastic Association's winter season has started. Some games are taking place inside small gyms and with no ventilation. Do you have any recommendations on how student athletes and coaches can stay safe?

So that decision to proceed with the youth sports was not supported by chief medical officers here within the state. And the reason for that is because of the current amount of spread that we have of virus. Certainly, the situation that was described, where individuals are playing in close contact with each other in an enclosed space with poor ventilation, is actually a prime scenario by which the virus loves to spread.

For those that find themselves in a situation like that, I would encourage individuals to take additional precautions-- wearing a mask as much as you possibly can during that endeavor, washing your hands frequently, avoiding as much close contact as you possibly can, and certainly not going to such a venue if you're feeling symptomatic at all.

OK, next question is from Carissa Planalp at 3TV/CBS 5. Dr. Bessel, you have repeatedly called for measures like a statewide mask mandate. The governor's office has responded, saying the focus should be on vaccinations. Do we still need measures at the state level? And can we vaccinate our way out of this?

So given the difficulty of where Arizona is and the fact that we've only had less than a week of decline here of Banner hospitalizations in our hospitals here in the state of Arizona, we need more than one strategy to bring us down off of this really awful peak that we just experienced.

Mitigation is a component of it and will help us decline the cases more quickly. Enforcement is a component of it and will help us decline the cases more quickly. Personal accountability is a component of it and will help us decline cases more quickly if we can mask up and shrink our circles. Vaccination is a component of it and can help us reduce cases more quickly as well. But as we just discussed during this press conference, there is not enough vaccine available at this time to

meet the need or the demand that is out there. So it's going to take more than just one strategy to help us get to a healthier, safer place for the state of Arizona.

OK, Craig Smith from KGUN had a follow-up question to his second dose question. And he asked, are you saying availability to get a second dose is supply dependent? Does that mean your second dose is not set aside at the time that you get your first?

So here in the state of Arizona, supply remains very limited, and it is going to continue to depend on getting additional supply to make sure that we're able to meet future appointments. So when you come to a Banner facility or a Banner pod for vaccination, you will be given a second appointment. But all of those second appointments will continue to be dependent on making sure that we have adequate supplies of the vaccine. As we all know, there is an executive order here in the state of Arizona that allows the state to move vaccine around to best meet the needs of all of the communities.