

All right. Thank you, Dr. Bessel. And at this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. Our first question comes from Brittany Thompson from 3TV and CBS 5 here in Phoenix. "Some health experts have said US hospitals may have to ration nurses, respirators, and care. Is Banner close to rationing care, and is there a certain number that would trigger such a plan?"

At this time, we are not doing any triage or rationing of care. We are operating outside of our usual and customary processes under the crisis standards of care that was allowed under Arizona, and those changes were made earlier this year. It is our absolute intention to do everything possible to avoid getting to a triage or rationing situation, but we need your help. We must mitigate further, and we need you to make different decisions this upcoming holiday weekend. Shrink your circle and wear your mask.

The next question comes from Matt Galka from Fox 10 here in Phoenix. "Earlier today, Doctor Christ said the state has more than 200,000 doses of vaccine, with another 100,000 on the way. So far, just under 40,000 people have been vaccinated. Banner is helping with some of those vaccinations, but right now that's only about 20% of doses given in about two weeks. Why is that number so low, and is there anything that can be done to get more people vaccinated quicker?"

We are working feverishly to continue to expand our ability to offer more vaccine. This is a new process for all of us. It's new for Banner, it's new for the other pods that are distributing vaccine, it's new for the counties where we operate, and it's new for the states. We are all learning as quickly as possible. We absolutely must vaccinate more quickly.

It's going to take a very concerted effort to do that, and we are meeting and collaborating on a daily basis to work our way towards that. We at this time appreciate the patience of everybody, including our health care workers who are also waiting their turn to be vaccinated. We will continue to pour many, many efforts, many, many hours, and a lot of our activity towards vaccination. We believe that vaccination is the way out and through this pandemic.

Joanna Guzman from KLD News in Tucson is asking about our recent announcement on diversions. She'd like to know why patients are being turned away if they're coming in via an ambulance, but they're not being turned away if they're coming in as walk-ins.

So, as I explained in my opening comments, it is not unusual for hospitals to go on diversion during the significant winter months. What is unusual at this time is the number of hospitals that are going on diversion at the same time. The reason that we divert ambulance traffic is because we can be in close communication with those ambulances as they are arriving and divert them more quickly to other hospitals and emergency departments that have more bandwidth. As I explained in the diversion comments at the beginning, those individuals that arrive by foot or by private vehicle, we will take those into emergency departments that are on diversion because we know it's very difficult to get them quickly to another place that has room.

Mike Pelton from ABC 15 in Phoenix asks, "Can you explain to people what using the triage addendum would look like at your hospitals, and how soon do you anticipate potentially using that?"

So, it is our absolute intention to do everything possible to avoid triage. We are absolutely working everything that we can, as I've explained in my opening comments this week and previous weeks, to continue to expand-- capacity, ICU beds, drugs, other medications, equipment, and the like. What triage would look like would be that we might-- if we got to that point-- be unable to care for everybody.

For instance, perhaps we would run out of ICU beds and we would then have to use a triage protocol to decide who would get that last ICU bed. We do this in a very ethical and predetermined fashion. We have studied it, we have drilled on it, and we hope that it does not ever come to that. Please help us never get to triage. Shrink your circle, and wear your mask.

Erica Stapleton at 12 News in Phoenix is asking a question on behalf of a colleague of hers also at the station. "How many Banner Health staff members have received the first vaccine dose, and do you think the state could be doing more to get vaccines out?"

We do not have an exact number to share with you here today. Every single pod is actually working very collectively. So, for instance, a Banner employee might go to a pod for a vaccination run by a different health system and vice versa. We continue to work with the counties where we operate and the states where we operate to increase the number of individuals that are getting vaccinated and to constantly increase our throughput. We'll look to see if we can bring you better numbers next week as we continue those collaborative efforts.

Erica Stapleton at 12 News again asks, "What specifically would you like to see in terms of mitigation and enforcement?"

We need more mitigation. And so what I'm asking everybody here to do is to do your personal part. You need to shrink your circle. You need to make very good decisions this upcoming holiday weekend, specifically for New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, and you need to wear your mask. We all know that there's a lot of individuals out there who have their mask below their nose. The mask needs to be all the way up above your nose and covering your mouth.

As we've discussed previously, we have asked for additional mitigation through our government agencies. That letter that was signed by myself and other chief medical officers is available for public review. If you don't have a copy of that, we can provide it after this press conference.

Mike Pelton from ABC 15 here in Phoenix asks, "I believe you mentioned several weeks ago that in a worst-case staffing scenario, nurses who test positive for COVID but are asymptomatic might be allowed to work. Is that happening now, and/or is that still an option?"

That does remain an option, although it would be an option that, again, we would prefer to not go to at this time. We currently are not exercising that option. We are augmenting our staff in many of the ways that I provided in my opening comments. This includes bringing staff from our other markets in Colorado and Wyoming, expanding our external contracted labor, upskilling clinical staff, and redeploying of corporate employees.

It does still remain an option for us further down the road if we exhaust all of our other options. We would prefer not to, and so we really ask you help protect our health care workers. Keep them safe. Shrink your circle, and please wear your mask. Consider your New Year's plans and try not to host or attend gatherings. This will help us tremendously.

Joanna Guzman again at KOLD TV in Tucson-- "Banner is diverting emergency transports due to extensive COVID-19 stays. What is the average hospital stay for COVID patients now in comparison to what it was previously?"

At this time, the average stay for COVID-19 patients has remained relatively stable. As I indicated in some of my other comments, for instance, a patient who has COVID has an ICU stay three to four times that of a non-COVID patient. That is creating a significant burden upon our ICUs, as an example.

Brittany Thompson from 3TV CBS 5 in Phoenix-- "Some hospitals in California have declared an internal disaster since they've had problems supplying oxygen to rooms. How close are we to having something like that happen here?"

We are aware of that issue that has occurred in California. As you may remember, that was also an issue earlier in the pandemic in Italy. At this time for Banner Health, we have adequate supplies of oxygen. We monitor that on an hourly basis, and we do not foresee in the foreseeable future that that is going to become a rate limiting issue for us. As I've said previously, we expect our biggest rate limiting issue to continue to expand capacity to care for those that need us will be staffing.

Matt Galka from Fox 10 asks, "Are some patients being discharged to get better at home right now that normally wouldn't in order to make room and alleviate stress on the hospitals?"

During the pandemic, we continue to learn how best to care for these COVID-19 patients. And we have been able to develop some programs where we can safely, efficaciously, and compassionately care for these types of patients. We do have a program called COVID at Home, where we are now able to discharge patients earlier than we could in the earlier part of the pandemic in a very safe fashion. This includes continuous remote monitoring to make sure that they're safe and that they continue on the recovery path. Again, we continue to learn more about this virus each and every day.

Brittini Thomason, 3TV CBS 5 asks, "Are employees with Banner Health required to get the COVID-19 vaccine?"

It is not a requirement for employees at Banner Health to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine. It is available to them. We are encouraging individuals to receive the vaccine. We are operating vaccination sites in all of our markets, and it is our desire to vaccinate as many of our healthcare workers as possible while we have vaccine. We'll look forward to providing some additional numbers for you next week.

Bob Christie from the Associated Press asks, "We know you signed the letter to DHS and the governor asking for additional mitigation measures. How frustrating is it for you as a medical provider that they have refused to act on that letter?"

I am a physician, and as that, I'm also a scientist. And I am very frustrated during this pandemic, because I feel that we can do better. It is very difficult disease to care for these patients that need us. There are individuals who are dying from this disease, as I shared earlier in my comments-- over 339,000 Americans. These individuals that are in our hospitals are very ill. And even individuals that don't need hospitalization can be very ill at home, and we know that many of them are suffering long-term consequences.

Mitigation will help us reduce the burden of disease. It will help less people become ill, it will help less people be hospitalized, it will help less people be in the ICU, and it will ultimately help less people to die. Mitigation will help us. Please also, in addition to my frustration of mitigation, do your part. Shrink your circle. Make different plans for New Year's. Do not host or go to a gathering, and wear your mask fully above your nose and your mouth.

Joanna Guzman from KOLD TV in Tucson-- "Are patients from Phoenix being diverted to Tucson or vice versa?"

I do not have statistics about that today. The situation with managing the patients across the state is very dynamic. There absolutely have been instances where we have moved individuals across different cities. We've actually moved individuals across different states. We can provide some updated numbers post this press conference, but I would remind all of you that this is a very dynamic situation. We do intend to continue to move patients to load balance the best way possible so that we can provide the most care to the most patients in the best possible way.