

# Dr. Marjorie Bessel opening remarks – 12/18/2020

I want to first start off by saying that yesterday was one of the most exciting days of my professional career. I had the privilege of administering the COVID-19 vaccine to several of our Banner frontline health care workers at the Arizona State Fairgrounds.

Banner employee Emily Beck, a nurse who had just finished up a difficult night shift in the COVID ICU at Banner – University Medical Center Phoenix, was our very first vaccination of the day and one of the first health care workers to be vaccinated in the state of Arizona.

Emily, like so many others working on the frontlines, understands how important this vaccine is in our fight against COVID-19. It is the beginning of the end to this pandemic – the glimmer of hope that she and her colleagues have longed for all year.

It is important for everyone in the community to know that the vaccine will not offer an overnight solution. We must all continue to adhere to the recommendations of our public health experts when it comes to masking and distancing. If we all do this exquisitely and get vaccinated when it is our turn, we can anticipate returning to a more normal way of living in the second half of next year.

I realize that seems like a long way away. I know it isn't what any of you want to hear, but it is the reality before us.

COVID-19 is at a level of uncontrolled spread in the United States. We are cautiously optimistic about the trends we have seen in our Colorado market the past couple of weeks where new cases, positivity rate and hospitalizations have been on the decline. This can be attributed, in part, to the mitigation that Governor Polis has put into place such as a statewide mask mandate and bidirectional roadmap for the opening and closing of non-essential businesses.

We have seen a similar trend in Wyoming following the implementation of stricter mandates.

Here in Arizona, unfortunately, we continue to experience exponential growth of the virus, with total cases, positivity rate and hospitalizations rising.

Today Arizona's reproduction rate is at 1.15 – one of the worst in the country. This means that the virus is spreading at a faster rate than desired. As you may recall, we want this number to be below 1.0.

This week here in Arizona, we also reached the highest number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients since the start of the pandemic, exceeding our prior surge this summer.

Today, 49 percent of all hospitalized patients are now COVID-19 positive. Just think about that for a minute. Nearly half of the patients currently being cared for in our Arizona hospitals are there because of a disease that did not even exist last year.

Patients who are hospitalized with COVID-19 are very ill – some of the sickest we have ever seen. They require a significant amount of care and attention. Many of them are hospitalized for a prolonged period and if in the ICU will then spend an average of two weeks on a ventilator. For those who are fortunate enough to leave the hospital, they have a slow road to full recovery which can take months.

As I have previously shared with you, our COVID-19 hospitalizations increased by 93 percent during November. They have increased again by that same number in the first 15 days of December. Exponential growth doubling time was 4 weeks in November. In December it has been 2 weeks. There is concern that this may go to 1 week and 4 days over the Christmas holidays.

ICU bed occupancy increased by 50 during November and again by that same number the first 15 days of December. We started November with ICU occupancy closer to 75 percent of our peak winter occupancy. Now that occupancy is at 150 percent of our peak for a typical winter. COVID-19 patients now occupy 55 percent of our ICU beds. That number was only 25 percent on November 1. Ventilator use by COVID-19 patients has increased by 500 percent since

November 1, and COVID-19 patients now account for 49 percent of all hospitalized patients.

The positivity rate for patients in our emergency rooms alone is close to 60 percent.

And, sadly, there are many COVID-19 patients who lose their battles with the virus. COVID-19 deaths in Arizona are on the rise. These deaths have caused us to exceed our morgue capacity at some of our hospitals, which has resulted in the use of refrigerated trucks to expand our morgue capacity. One of these trucks is currently in use at Banner – University Medical Center Phoenix and another is at a Banner storage facility on standby. We will make photos of the trucks available to you after this press conference.

Recently you may have seen some weekly reports developed by the White House Coronavirus Task Force, released by The Center for Public Integrity, which provide a summary and recommendations for each state based on positivity rates and spread of the virus.

Recent reports for Arizona have shown that we are in the red zone for cases and test positivity. According to the task force, we are experiencing a full resurgence equal to the summer surge but without the needed aggressive mitigation across the state. The White House Coronavirus Task Force has stated that mitigation efforts must increase, including the implementation of key state and local policies that focus on uniform behavioral change like masking, no indoor gatherings outside of immediate households and aggressive testing to find the asymptomatic individuals responsible for the majority of infectious spread.

Avoiding indoor gatherings includes staying away from indoor areas that are enclosed that do not have adequate ventilation and appropriate HEPA filters.

The White House Coronavirus Task Force is also stating that Arizona should implement key local policies for mitigation. We've seen recent actions, as an example, by the Mayor of Tucson, Pima County, Mayor of Phoenix and the Phoenix City Council. Giving local mayors authority to take mitigation steps will help the state of Arizona's health care system reduce COVID-19 cases in our

hospitals, which in turn helps all of us by ensuring that the health care we or our families may require will be there in our time of need.

The White House Coronavirus Task Force also states that if state and local policies do not reflect the seriousness of the current situation, all public health officials must alert the state population directly. If you don't have the website that has posted these White House reports publicly, it will be provided following this press conference.

As the chief clinical officer for the largest health system in Arizona which is caring for nearly half of all the hospitalized COVID-19 patients in the state, I am following the direction of the White House Coronavirus Task Force by alerting you directly about what needs to be done to slow the spread of COVID-19 before the level exceeds that of our health care resources.

In addition to more mitigation and enforcement, we need all of you to shrink your circles to include only those you live with and have regular, close contact with. When you are with others outside of your circle, we need you to mask at all times. This includes having your mask completely cover your nose and your mouth. Mask when you are around colleagues, friends, classmates, neighbors, extended family and anyone else who you encounter outside of your circle. Please adjust your holiday plans to not include travel or gathering with others outside of your household.

These actions are absolutely necessary, and we need every Arizonan to do their part so that health care can continue to be accessible to all those who need it, both COVID and non-COVID patients. When health care systems become overrun, all care is jeopardized. When health care systems become overrun, patients will not get the same timely delivery of care. When health care systems become overrun, patients will suffer higher death rates. This could mean the car accident victim, the heart attack patient, the stroke patient or the child with a severe asthma attack.

Before I open this up for questions, I want to address a few more areas that are typically of high interest for media.

First is our progress on staffing. As I have mentioned to you before, we remain focused on securing external staffing resources to support the growing number of COVID-19 patients in our hospitals. To date, we have hired more than 2,000 contracted workers to support us during this surge and are still recruiting for 339 more. As I have previously stated, staffing will likely be the rate limiting factor in our ability to further expand hospital capacity.

Regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, as many of you have likely seen in reports over the last 24-48 hours, the FDA advisors have recommended the second coronavirus vaccine and the agency will soon take action on those recommendations. We could see an emergency use authorization from the FDA as soon as today, with shipments of the vaccine arriving here in Arizona next week.

Lastly, many of you had questions about Arizona's Crisis Standards of Care plan at last week's press conference. The Crisis Standards of Care plan was activated by the Arizona Department of Health Services many months ago, and it remains active in our state. This care plan allows health systems like Banner to make changes to our usual health care delivery. Some examples of those changes include things like putting two patients in one room, converting pediatric ICUs into adult ICUs and reducing charting requirements for our nurses and doctors.

To date Arizona health systems have not activated the triage addendum of Arizona's Crisis Standards of Care plan. That addendum, when activated, would help to guide clinical decisions in an ethical and fair way should we reach a critical situation where we no longer have enough of an essential resource such as staff.

Health systems in the state of Arizona are working together to manage this crisis. The triage addendum will only be activated in our state once hospitals and health systems have exceeded the ability to provide care due to the lack of an essential resource, such as ICU nursing staffing or ventilators.

We hope to not get there. We want to continue to provide care to all those who need it. We are doing everything within our power to prevent a triage situation. And, we need you to do your part.

- **Marjorie Bessel, MD, Banner Health Chief Clinical Officer**