

# Dr. Marjorie Bessel opening remarks – press conference 12.30.20

## Script

Several grim milestones were reached this week as we continue our fight against COVID-19. Nearly a year after the virus surfaced here in the United States, it has claimed the lives of more than 339,000 Americans. That means that so far, 1 in 1,000 Americans have died from COVID-19. The United States also surpassed 19 million total cases this week, with Arizona accounting for more than a half a million of those. Nearly one third of the Arizona cases were reported just this month.

COVID-19 hospitalizations continue to increase at an exponential rate here in Arizona. In December, bed occupancy increased by 150%. That is a 286% increase since November 1. These patients now account for half of all hospitalized patients at Banner hospitals in Arizona.

On December 29, Banner's Arizona hospitals reached 104% of licensed bed capacity. Some of our hospitals have been operating well above that threshold for some time now. For example, Banner Estrella is at 125% of licensed bed capacity, Banner Desert is at 122%, Banner Del E. Webb is at 121% and Banner Thunderbird is at 124% of licensed bed capacity.

ICU bed occupancy by COVID-19 patients increased by 600% since November 1. Some of our hospitals have increased their ICU capacity by nearly 250% to meet this demand. Our ICU occupancy is now at 170% of our peak winter volume. These patients account for 58% of adult ICU beds at Banner hospitals in Arizona. As I have said in the past, these COVID-19 patients are very very sick. They require a great deal of care and much longer stays in the ICU compared to the typical ICU patient. Many of them also require the support of a ventilator. Since November 1, COVID-19 patients on ventilators has increased by 700%.

Due to these increases, and the influx of patients, several Phoenix-area hospitals are going on diversion. This means that the hospitals are closed to incoming emergency transports and hospital transfers while they quickly work to address a backlog of patients. Diversion does not apply to walk-in patients who need emergency care.

It is not uncommon for hospitals to go on diversion during the winter when volume is higher, but it is unusual for so many to be on diversion at the same time—with the length of stay and complexity of care for COVID-19 patients adding to the challenge that this presents. To address this issue, hospitals and health systems in the Phoenix-area have implemented what we call rolling diversions. Hospitals will be assigned specific times to go on diversion while the others remain open for transports and transfers. This process will help to balance the load so that

no one hospital or health system becomes overwhelmed with patients.

I realize hospital diversion might be a new term for many of you, and you might not understand fully what this means for hospitals and for those seeking care, so I hope to provide some clarity for you on this topic.

When multiple hospitals in the same area need to go on diversion at the same time, it is very concerning. For those seeking care, you may be transported to a hospital that is further away from your home and you will experience longer wait times.

Due to the recent pressures on our health system brought on by this increase of patients, Banner Health has made the decision to pause all elective surgeries, effective January 1.

We have not yet implemented the triage addendum of the Arizona Crisis Standards of Care plan, but this diversion activity is an early indication that triage may soon be necessary if volumes continue to increase like they did this past week.

As I have said before, Banner and the other hospitals and health systems in the state are doing everything we can to prevent a triage situation, but we cannot do it alone. We need more mitigation, more enforcement and more personal commitment from Arizonans to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

As I have shared with you before, the rate limiting factor in our ability to further expand capacity is staffing. We continue to source for external contract labor. To date we have hired 2,294 contracted workers and are recruiting for 176 more. Those we have hired have started or are scheduled to start soon. We are also working to redeploy staff and transfer supplies from our Colorado and Wyoming markets to support the Arizona surge, and continue to upskill clinical staff and redeploy corporate team members to provide support where there is the greatest need. In the last two weeks, our team members completed 1,500 redeployment shifts at Banner hospitals and vaccination pods.

To date, Banner Health has administered more than 17,500 vaccines. We now have enough vaccine in Arizona to vaccinate all health care workers who are willing to be vaccinated, and we are moving through this process as quickly as possible. We know that widespread vaccination is our way out of this pandemic.

Today I would also like to share with you some recent studies and guidance about COVID-19. We have said throughout the pandemic that we continue to learn more about the virus as studies are conducted and research is published. Recently there have been a few announcements that I want to draw your attention to.

The first is that the CDC has updated its guidance for pregnant women. Based on what we know at this time, pregnant women

are at an increased risk for severe illness and death from COVID-19, compared to non-pregnant women. Additionally, pregnant women with COVID-19 might be at increased risk for other adverse outcomes, such as preterm birth. It is especially important for pregnant women, and those who live with them, to protect themselves from getting COVID-19.

In addition, a recent study also found a connection between COVID-19 and erectile dysfunction. A link to this study will be posted to Banner's newsroom following the press conference, and we will make an expert available if you have specific questions about this study. Dr. Mehan, a valley urologist, will provide additional insights on this finding. I spoke with him today and he is seeing these issues in his practice.

Lastly, I'd like to briefly discuss with you the COVID-19 mutations that were recently identified in the U.K. Just yesterday this strain was confirmed in the United States in a Colorado man in his 20s with no travel history.

There is still much to learn about this new strain. U.K. scientists have warned that it is much more contagious. They have also found through studies that it is more likely to affect children. At this time, it does not seem likely that the new strain will evade vaccine-induced immunity, but more research needs to be done to confirm.

As always, I would like to close with my ask for all of you in the community. Please shrink your circles to include the fewest

number of people possible. Colleagues, friends, classmates, neighbors, grandparents and other extended family do not belong in your circle. When you are around those outside of your circle, always wear a mask. And finally, please celebrate safely on New Year's Eve by not attending or hosting gatherings.

We need every Arizonan to join us in this fight against COVID-19. We cannot do it without you.

- Marjorie Bessel, MD, Banner Health Chief Clinical Officer