

Thank you, everybody, for joining this morning. I want to remind everybody that I just took off my mask, I'm sanitizing my hands, and I'm more than six feet away from everybody who is here helping.

I want to first start off by saying that yesterday was the most exciting day of my entire 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 at the COVID ICU at Banner University 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 other workers on the front line, 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 long.

It is important for everyone in the community to know that 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 the year.

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

COVID is at a level of uncontrolled spread in the United States. We are cautiously optimistic about the trends that 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 statewide mask mandate and bidirectional roadmap for the opening and closing of non-essential businesses.

We've 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 all rising. Today, Arizona's reproduction rate is 1.15, one of the worst in the country. This means that the virus is spreading at a faster rate than desired. And as you may recall, this number needs to be below 1.0.

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since the start of the pandemic, exceeding our prior surge this summer. Today, 49% 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.

People who are hospitalized with COVID-19, as we've spoken about before, are very ill, some of the sickest that we have ever seen. They require a significant amount of care and attention. Many of them are hospitalized for a prolonged period of time. And if they're in the intensive care unit, they will 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've previously shared with you, our COVID-19 hospitalizations increased by 93% during November. They've increased again by that same number in the first 15 days of December.

Exponential growth doubling time was four weeks in November. In December, it has now been only two weeks. There is concern that this may go to one week and then to four days over the Christmas holidays.

ICU bed capacity 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% of our peak winter occupancy. And now that occupancy is at 150% of our peak for a typical winter season. COVID-19 patients now occupy 55% of our ICU beds. That number was only 25% on November 1.

Ventilator use by COVID-19 patients has increased by 500% since November 1. And COVID-19 patients account for 49% of all of our hospitalized patients. The positivity rate for patients in our emergency rooms alone is close to 60%, 6-0%.

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've may have seen some weekly reports developed by the White House Corona 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 behavior change, like masking, no indoor gatherings outside of immediate households, and aggressive testing to find the asymptomatic individuals who continue to spread the disease. 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 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, the mayor of Phoenix, and the Phoenix City Council. Giving local mayors authority to take mitigation steps and help the state of Arizona's health care system reduce COVID-19 cases in our hospital, 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 up 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 who are 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 victim, 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 the surge. And we are still recruiting for 339 more. As I've previously stated, staffing will likely be the rate limiting factor in our ability to further expand hospital capacity.

Now regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, as many of you have likely seen in reports over the last 24 to 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 a single 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 the 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 care due to the lack of an essential resource, such as ICU nursing staffing or ventilators.

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

All right, thank you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. So Dr. Bessel, the first question comes from Cameron Polom of ABC 15 here in Phoenix. "Maricopa County says 11 patients experienced mild side effects during vaccinations yesterday. How many occurred at your site? And can you describe what they experienced?"

Yes. So so far across the Banner Health system, we have experienced only one side effect of an individual. That individual had hyperventilation issue and was able to be cared for. I do want to reiterate that the vaccine does have a reaction of your body that can actually exhibit symptoms.

So we do expect individuals who get the vaccine to experience symptoms such as fatigue, fever, headache, muscle aches. That is a normal response to the vaccine. And in fact, in the trials, a large percentage of individuals who received the vaccine did have those side effects. Most all of those side effects went away in about 24 hours or less.

Our next question is from Nicholas Gerbis from KJZZ News here in Phoenix. "Multiple states have said they're coming up short in their second shipments of the Pfizer vaccine, and Pfizer says it has, quote, 'millions more doses available,' but has yet to receive any shipment instructions. What is the situation here in Arizona?"

I am not sure whether we are experiencing a reduction of Pfizer vaccine at this time. We will go ahead and follow up, and we can respond back to that question in writing. Thank you.

All right, thank you, Dr. Bessel. Our next question comes from Angela Gonzales from the Phoenix Business Journal. "How soon will the general public get the COVID vaccines after all essential health care workers get their first dose?"

So at Banner Health, we continue to work with the states where we operate and our counties in a very collaborative fashion, and we'll be following their key into how we do the recommended vaccines. Right now we're concentrating on the 1a subgroup, which is those health care workers. We do expect, throughout early 2021, that individuals outside of that 1a tier will begin to get vaccination. It is expected that 1b will follow 1a, and 1b will be other essential workers. More to come in the upcoming weeks and months as we receive vaccine and also work with our states and counties to make sure that everybody is prioritized correctly.

Mike Pelton from ABC 15 here in Phoenix, "As ICU capacity runs low around the state, recently several viewers have reached out to say hospitals are always busy in the winter, which is nothing new. For those folks, can you compare what you're up against right now compared with a typical December?"

Yes. So we are already exceeding what a typical winter surge is. And I do want to go back to some of my comment both earlier in this press conference and in other communications. COVID patients, they are very, very ill. They require a lot of care from all of our staff.

And remember that our staff are wearing all of this extra PPE as they care for these individual patients. So a COVID patient today is requiring more care than, let's say, an influenza patient last year. So as we look at all of those statistics of our occupancy rates, we need to remember that our COVID patients are very ill and are requiring a lot of our staff time to take care of them.

Erica Stapleton from 12 News asks five questions here, so I'm going to read the first question to you, Dr. Bessel. "We've heard from a home health nurse saying she's been unable to schedule a time to

get the COVID-19 vaccine at the Banner fairground site. She's tried going online and can never make it past hold over the phone." So here's the first question, "Are there delays in scheduling?"

So we are just starting our vaccination process. And at the fairgrounds yesterday, we did a couple hundred individuals and are in a ramp-up process. We have over 20,000 individuals that are in that first tier of 1a that need to be vaccinated. So we will be continuing to ramp up.

There are other pods servicing the Maricopa County, and we continue to message and work with all of the caregivers who need and are prioritized to receive vaccine. We are asking everybody to remain patient. It is our understanding that we will continue to receive vaccine. We will have enough vaccine to distribute to all of those individuals in that prioritized tier, but it is going to take us some time to work our way through everybody. Thank you for your patience.

Erica also asks, "Are there any hurdles in distribution?"

The biggest hurdle in distribution at this time is just continuing to ramp up. So as I just stated, we did a couple hundred individuals at the fairgrounds yesterday and are working our way to ramp up to over 1,000 individuals per day. This is a new vaccine. It has to be handled very carefully. And of course, we're following every single step to make sure that the vaccine is distributed exactly as it needs to be. Thank you for your patience.



The next question she asks, "How many people are expected to be vaccinated at the Banner site?"

So at this time, over 20,000 of our Banner Health care workers who are on the front line are in that prioritized tier. We will continue to work our way through each sub-tier, and we will only move on from one sub-tier to the next when we have assured ourselves that everybody in that first tier has been vaccinated. Again, we're working our way through this process. We expect to continue to get vaccine each week. And as we get more and more efficient, we will get more and more people through that, and we will continue to be transparent and communicate about every single step of the way.

And the last question from Erica Flagstaff-- health care staff say they're getting transfers from Phoenix. Are Banner sites full or needing to use the surge line to send people out of Phoenix?

So the Arizona surge line is being collaborated with at the state level and with all of our health care systems to load balance the state. Banner Health continues to receive many patients through the surge line. We remain open to be able to do that. We are in constant communication with the surge line as well as our other colleagues in other health care systems to load balance the state.

So our next question comes from Carissa Planalp with Arizona's Family 3TV and KPHO channel 5. Her question-- are Banner employees eligible for 1a required-- are they eligible for 1a required to get vaccinated?

Could you just repeat that one more time for me, please?

Sure. I think what she's asking is, are the eligible employees who fall under the current tier for vaccination-- are they currently required to be vaccinated?

So at this time, the COVID vaccine is not a requirement for our employees. We are offering it to those that are in that highest tier. And we will continue to work our way through tier and sub-tier. It is not a requirement at this time for anybody who's prioritized to receive the vaccine.

Stephanie Innes from the Arizona Republic asks, what is the current nurse to patient ratio in Banner's ICUs? And is that different from the ratio during non-pandemic times?

So the ratios of staff to patient is a very dynamic process right now. It is changing on an hourly basis. Everybody who's working in the hospitals is working diligently to provide the care that is needed by these patients.

We are also utilizing additional staff as we've spoken about-- the external contracted labor. And we're also redeploying some of our other staff from ambulatory sites and even from corporate to go provide helping hands. The actual ratio is changing on an hourly basis.

Mike Pelton from ABC15 asks, you mentioned last week 100% capacity could be reached on 12/15, so this past Tuesday. What is your Arizona capacity currently situated at?

We have not reached 100% of licensed bed occupancy yet at this time. We can follow up and get you

today's exact number. I don't have it with me here this morning.

Cameron Polom from ABC15 asks, how many vaccinations are scheduled in Maricopa County today?

I am not aware of the total number of vaccinations that are scheduled throughout Maricopa County today. The fairgrounds is open. We did a couple hundred yesterday and are going to do that same amount today. We will continue to be ramping up day after day. Our goal is to get to more than 1,000 per day.

Cameron also asks, how soon do you expect to scale up closer to 1,000 vaccinations a day?

We expect to do that in the upcoming days to weeks. Again, we are following every process step to make sure that we were getting the vaccine in to everybody in the appropriate way. And as we continue to get more efficient with that, we will continue to open up slots. We are going to communicate that to all of our employees and others who are waiting for vaccine in a very transparent fashion.

Bud Foster from KOLD TV in Tucson asks, what does it mean when you say 150% of our peak?

Let me just go back for a second and read that exact-- so when I was going through those statistics, that statistic was that our occupancy is at 150% of our usual peak for a typical winter. So that was comparing our occupancy rate here today to last year where we were in a typical winter peak.

Mike Pelton from ABC15 asks, what ripple effect does the surge have throughout your hospitals? As in, are patients waiting longer in the ER, being discharged sooner than normal, et cetera?

So the ripple effect of the surge that we are experiencing is affecting many parts of our health care delivery. And as I spoke about in my comments here in the opening, we can expect to see delay of timeliness of care, individuals waiting longer to be seen. And we are also starting to experience, in some parts of our market, elective surgeries needing to be delayed.

These are the types of ripple effects that we can expect and also the type of ripple effect that we can expect to continue to get worse as the surge descends upon us. Again, I'm going to ask everybody to please do your part. We need continued mitigation here in the state. And we need everybody to do their part. Wear your mask, and shrink your circle.

Nicole Garcia for Fox 10 here in Phoenix asks, what happens when ICU is exceeding capacity? For example, are patients turned away? Or are they placed in hallways, et cetera?

So at this time, as I spoke about for the Arizona crisis standards of care, we are not at triage. So we are caring for all patients that need intensive care. We are doing so by continuing to expand our capacity in those areas.

For instance, in some ICU rooms, we are placing two patients instead of one. In addition to that, we're using other areas of the hospital as an ICU place for patients to receive care. We continue to expand to meet the community needs. But again, I'm going to come back to-- we need mitigation. We need everybody wearing your mask and also shrinking your circle.

Stephanie Innes from the Arizona Republic asks, are you concerned that the upcoming Christmas and New Year's holidays are going to exasperate the current COVID surge in Arizona?

Yes. We are concerned about the upcoming holidays. We are still feeling the effect of holidays. As you can remember back in our summer surge, we had a peak after Memorial Day weekend. We continued to surge after 4th of July. We are now starting to feel the effect of Thanksgiving. And as we go into the rest of this month and into early January with the holidays upon us, we can expect to see continued surge.

Again, I'm going to come back to, you can do your part. Please wear your mask and shrink your circle. And beware of your circle even during the holiday season. There are different ways to celebrate for this year. And we can all look forward to a much different holiday season in 2021.

