

Jasmine Ramirez from KOLD Channel 13 in Tucson asks, "has Banner stopped hiring travel nurses? And if so, how does this impact staffing levels?"

Banner has committed to a large number of individuals who come to us through the external contracted route to help augment our core staffing throughout the entire pandemic and during this winter season. We continue to have those individuals come to Banner. We have a number of individuals who are starting their engagement with us this week. And we expect that we will need to continue to have a fairly good portion of our staffing provided through that throughout the rest of this winter pathogen season.

Nicole Feltman from Tucson Local Media asks, "are there vaccinations and boosters being administered at Banner locations right now for staff, patients, and others in the community? If they are not being administered, what's the reason?"

So Banner has been committed to providing vaccination throughout this pandemic, and we still do have avenues for individuals to receive vaccination throughout multiple different locations within Banner. Thank you for that question, and a reminder that the best way to protect yourself against becoming infected, being hospitalized, being in our intensive care unit is to get vaccinated. As I stated in my opening comments, the vast majority of individuals who are hospitalized right now in our hospitals are those that are unvaccinated or only partially vaccinated. So if you're not yet vaccinated, please do so. If you are vaccinated, but have not yet received your booster, please do that, as well.

Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix asks, "you say 83% of your COVID-19 patients are unvaccinated. This number used to be higher. So are there more breakthrough hospitalizations? Do you believe this is due to people that are not boosted and have lost some protection against omicron?"

Yeah, so let me just restate those statistics. So currently, 83% of hospitalized COVID patients at Banner are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated, and 87% of our ICU COVID patients at Banner are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated. Yes, with the omicron variant, we are seeing a slight increase in the number of individuals requiring hospitalization who are having a breakthrough infection. Our numbers were a little bit higher of who was unvaccinated in the prior wave.

However, I would still recount again that 87% of our patients who have COVID in our ICUs are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated. Vaccine by far and away remains the most effective way to protect yourself against becoming infected and needing hospitalization or ICU level of care.

Andrew Melendez from KVOA Channel 4 in Tucson asks, "has there been any thoughts to using student nurses?"

Thank you. We have been working very carefully and closely with our universities that are training our nursing students, and we've been working with them to bring them on board very close to the time when they are graduating to augment our core staffing. We expect to continue to do that as the pandemic hopefully comes to an end and we enter into the endemic phase of this, as we continue to work to increase our core staffing in future months.

Melanie MacEachern from the Hertel Report asks two questions. So I will ask you the first, Dr. Bessel. "Does Banner have any recommendations on places to obtain KN95 or N95 masks?"

We do not have any official recommendation where to obtain a KN95 or an N95 mask. Masks have become much more readily available throughout this part of the pandemic compared to prior parts of the pandemic, and you can go online and there are a number of different suppliers that will be able to provide you with an appropriate mask.

The second question asked, "are Banner hospitals currently experiencing shortages of medical materials? For example, syringes, specimen collection tubes, medical vials. If so, does Banner have any insight into expectations for medical supplies and shortages due to supply chain issues going forward?"

Throughout the pandemic, Banner Health, like all other health care systems throughout our country and throughout the world, have intermittently experienced shortages of different types of supplies. We've been able to utilize our usual process of subject matter experts when we have experienced that to come together and figure out how best to mitigate through that. At any one particular day, it is likely that we are experiencing some type of potential shortage of a supply, and have taken steps to make sure that we're able to continue to provide appropriate care. This actually happens in non-pandemic times, and we have become very accustomed to being able to mitigate through those types of shortages. Today at Banner Health, there is not anything that is causing a significant shortage that has required us to make significant changes to our usual process delivery.

Nicole Grigg from ABC 15 here in Phoenix asks, "we have heard fears of crisis standards of care in our hospitals. Did Banner come close to this, or were you able to, quote unquote, dodge a bullet?"

So today, Banner is operating under crisis staffing, which is what we have spoken about previously that allows an expedited process for individuals who have COVID to come back to work under a certain safe set of scenario. That includes things like making sure that everybody is masking appropriately, as an example. As far as crisis standards of care, Banner Health has not had to implement that related to direct patient care.

I do believe that the omicron variant has provided an opportunity for the delta surge in the state of Arizona to not reach its peak that it might otherwise have done, had omicron not come in and overtaken the delta variant. We are very thankful for the fact that, as I've shared earlier, that our intensive care unit population is actually at a lesser level than it was in prior surges. But we want to ask everybody to remain vigilant at this time.

We have not yet peaked with this omicron wave, and we still have some time ahead of us. Please get vaccinated, get boosted, and wear a good KN95 or N95 mask until we peak and get over that peak and are headed down, when we can go back to a more normal type of scenario of transmission in our communities that does not require this level of vigilance. But we are not there yet. So please, help and do your part.

Another question asked by Nicole Grigg at ABC 15, "we have heard doctors running out of sotrovimab. Are Banner facilities out of this drug, as well?"

So sotrovimab is the monoclonal antibody that is effective against omicron. It is in scarce supply at this time. Banner does have multiple locations where you can receive monoclonal antibody, but because of the scarcity of the supply of this particular drug, there is a tiering of criteria that you must meet in order to get monoclonal antibody of that type.

If you are experiencing symptoms that could be COVID, please get tested. If you test positive, please get with your primary care physician or go to urgent care to be assessed as to whether you meet those criteria. And if so, then we will evaluate you and see if we can find an appointment that has sotrovimab available for you. Most importantly, if you're in a high-risk category, get tested early and talk with your physician about whether you meet criteria.