

Banner Health | 12-14-21 Press Conference Transcript_1

Thank you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters and attendants so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. And again, just a friendly reminder to our media partners, please include your name and media outlet affiliation with your question, and please remember to type your question as if you're asking it in person.

Our first question comes from Howard Fischer at the Capitol Media Services. "We hear a lot about bed capacity, but that does not address staffing issues. I am hoping you address the question of whether there actually is staff available for all the beds you have, occupied or not, or whether the system is really operating over actual versus rated capacity."

So the statistics that I said in my opening comments are being reported out as staffed, licensed bed capacity. The short answer to your question is no, we do not have enough staff to staff all of the bed capacity that we have and the capacity that we could build within our hospitals. We continue to look for opportunities of how we can position ourselves to best take care of all of the community needs that we have, both COVID and non-COVID. But when you look at reporting, the reporting is staffed bed capacity.

Stephanie Innes with the *Arizona Republic* asks two questions. I will ask you the first. "Could you review what crisis standards of care would mean for a hospital system like Banner Health and talk about whether you've had to use it yet during the pandemic?"

Crisis standards of care is defined at the state level and we evaluate every day whether or not we are in that level of care. At this time within the state of Arizona, we are reporting out that we are at contingency level of care, which means that we are not at our normal level of care, but have had to do some things differently to manage the surge and the load of COVID and non-COVID patients that are upon us. If and when we get to a crisis level, we will communicate that appropriately to our state representatives.

Again, I want to go back to some of my opening comments about what the community and all of you can do to help us. Please go to the appropriate level of care as I outlined, and please, if you're currently eligible to get a COVID vaccine or a COVID booster, do that to help reduce the load that we have on our hospital for COVID patients. This will allow us to have additional capacity for all of those non-COVID patients that also need our care.

So the second question that Stephanie asks, "If you haven't had to use the crisis standards of care, is it possible you will, given the level of capacity?"

Yes, it is possible. And in my opening comments, again, I'm asking for the help from the community. If our continued forecast holds true, we will be in a position where we will be unable to meet the care needs of all of Arizonans. We again ask for your help. There are many things that you can do to assist us. Please make sure that you go to the right level of care and please, if you're eligible for COVID vaccination or a COVID booster, go and get that booster. If we can reduce the load of COVID patients on our hospitals, it opens up more opportunity and capacity for us to take care of non-COVID patients as well. It is our desire to take care of everybody who needs us, and we need the community's help enable to be-- to reach that goal.

Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix asks, "Have other states or rural areas in Arizona requested help in receiving patients? Are you in a position where you can assist or has the surge affected that possibility?"

There have been other states and there are other states that are also under significant strain on their health care systems. Many of you have read and written about that and are aware that there are other states that have declared crisis standards of care within their system and within their state. At this time, given our current capacity, which, again, is rate-limited by our staffing, we are not in a position to accept transfers in from out of state.

We continue to evaluate our capacity every single day and multiple times during the day to create the best opportunities that we can to meet the needs of our community, both for COVID patients and non-COVID patients. It is a very fluctuating situation and we have a team of experts that look at it frequently to, again, best meet the needs of our community.

Liliana Salgado again from Univision asks, "Other hospital systems report that they are in the same position as December 2020. Is this the same for Banner?"

So as I stated in my opening comments, if you take a look at Arizona as a whole on the Arizona Department of Health Services website, you will see that we are at the highest point of inpatient hospital utilization since the beginning of the pandemic. This is a combination of both COVID and non-COVID patients. So while our number of COVID patients is not at its peak, our total number of patients is higher than at any point during the entire pandemic.

We ask all of you to help us. Our desire is to meet the health care needs of the community, both COVID and non-COVID. Please seek care at the appropriate level of care as I articulated in my opening statement. And also if you're eligible for a COVID vaccine or a COVID booster, please do not delay and go get vaccinated. This will assist in reducing the COVID load on our hospitals at this time.

Lindsay Walker with Independent News Media asks, "Are Banner hospitals having to defer elective surgeries due to capacity issues?"

I did address that in my opening comments, and I will re-articulate those comments. At this time, Banner continues to perform scheduled medically necessary surgeries and procedures. This is done at a facility level and is evaluated on a daily basis. We have had postponements of these procedures due to mostly our ICU constrained capacity.

Looking into the future, we're asking for your help. It is our desire to take care of both COVID and non-COVID patients and also to perform medically necessary scheduled surgeries and procedures. These are patients that also need care. We will continue to evaluate this on a hospital-by-hospital basis and on a day-by-day basis, and make adjustments depending on what our capacity is.

Terry Tang with the Associated Press asks two questions. I'll ask the first. "How many of Banner COVID-19 patients are unvaccinated?"

The vast majority of COVID-19 patients that are hospitalized are unvaccinated. And we have been running about the same percentage for the last number of weeks. In our Banner hospitals today, approximately 85% of COVID patients who are hospitalized are unvaccinated. In some of our ICUs, that number exceeds 90% being unvaccinated. In some of our ICUs, in certain days, 100% of all COVID ICU patients are unvaccinated.

Again, we ask all of you to do your part. COVID vaccines will reduce the likelihood of needing hospital-level care. If you are available to get your COVID vaccine and have not yet received it, please do so. If you meet the criteria to get a COVID booster, please do so as well. You can help us make sure that we're available to meet health care needs for everybody.

Terry Tang from the Associated Press asks the second question. "Has the proportion of unvaccinated patients been pretty much the same for the last couple of months?"

In general, the proportion of unvaccinated COVID patients in our hospitals has remained relatively about the same. We will bring additional statistics to you as we continue to monitor that. But again, I would ask everybody to please assist. Get your COVID vaccine if not yet vaccinated. And if you're eligible for your COVID booster, please go get it.

Bram Resnick from 12 News here in Phoenix asks, "Does Banner think it might need help from the National Guard to staff makeshift care tents outside the hospitals to handle patients?"

We certainly do hope that we do not get to a point like that, although our forecast, if it continues to hold true and cases continue to increase, will severely strain our hospitals. We are operating right now at about our maximum capacity that we're able to at this moment. Again, our desire is to take care of COVID and non-COVID patients, and we ask for your assistance.

Please also know that Banner Health is in frequent communication with other health care systems in the state of Arizona. We work collaboratively. We meet frequently with the county Department of Health Services within many counties, and we are also in frequent communication with our state to help coordinate whatever efforts and steps we may need to take as we all face the upcoming weeks.

Griselda Zetino from KTAR News here in Phoenix asks, "How many of your Arizona hospitals are operating above 100% capacity?"

We have several of our Arizona hospitals today operating above our 100% of our staffed bed capacity. Each day, that can fluctuate. And every day, of course, we look at what we are doing and what we can do to continue to meet the needs of the community.

We are doing our job and modulating as best as we can within the constraints of the health care staffing that I articulated in my opening comments. I ask all of you to do your job as well. Please get vaccinated and please get booster vaccines if you are eligible.