

## Banner Health | 8-10 Press Conference transcript\_1

Thanks you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them.

Our first question comes from Howard Fisher, who is a reporter with Capitol Media Services here in Arizona. Do you believe that schools should mandate masks faculty and staff?

So I'm going to go back to my comments that I stated in the beginning, which there are three things that we can all do to help keep our kids safe and in school. Number one, everybody get vaccinated who is age eligible. Number two, mask up when in school. And number three, do not go to school when you're ill. All of those we can help with and look forward to all of us doing that so that the kids can be in school and also be safe.

Megan McNeil from KOLD TV 13 in Tucson asks two questions that go together. I'm going to ask you the first question, Dr. Bessel. Megan says, thank you for the June-July pediatric numbers. How many children are hospitalized with COVID-19 among your Arizona hospitals currently?

Just give me one second here to refer to some of my data. So we may need to follow up with that after. What I do have for today is number of pediatric patients who are hospitalized in enhanced precaution, which are those that may have COVID or are undergoing testing for COVID. That number today is 50, five zero.

And then the second part of that question, how many are in the ICU and are on ventilators?

I do not believe that I have those numbers with me. We can follow up and get that information to you after the press conference. Thank you.

Next question again comes from Howard Fisher with Capitol Media Services here in Arizona. Do you believe there will be limits on elective surgeries because of COVID and other respiratory patients?

So it is our desire to, here at Banner Health, be able to take care of all of you who are in our communities that need us. At this time, we are managing taking care of those who have COVID as well as those who have non-COVID. We would like to continue to do that for as long as possible, and hopefully throughout this surge.

There are things that all of you can do out there to make sure that we, as a health care delivery system here in the state of Arizona, can be available to everybody who might need us. Please, if you're not vaccinated, do so, and remember to mask when you're indoors. That will help us, as a health care delivery system, preserve our ability to be there for everybody who needs us, both COVID and non-COVID patients.

Megan McNeil with KOLD TV 13 in Tucson asks, do you have concerns with the number of children being on ventilators? Why?

So at this time, as I stated in my opening comments, Banner Health's experience is that most of our pediatric patients who are in enhanced precautions or testing positive for COVID are actually not in our ICUs. So other parts of the country, and other states that I referenced, are having a different experience. We will, of course, continue to monitor that and will bring statistics to you in our briefings as they do emerge. But right now, most of our pediatric patients are requiring med surge type of care.

Lilianna Salgado, who is a reporter here with one of the Spanish-speaking television stations in Phoenix, asks, how many of the 435 patients in the ICU are COVID-19 patients?

Give me one second to refer here to see if I have that statistic readily available. Hold on.

So right now in our ICUs, 90 patients are COVID and 345 are non-COVID.

Nicole Garcia with Fox 10 News here in Phoenix asks, in the last few weeks, the COVID death rate in Arizona has spiked. Is Banner still using refrigerated trucks as temporary morgues?

At this time, we have not had to expand our morgue capacity.

Megan McNeil with KOLD TV Channel 13 in Tucson. Do you have a response to protests against the vaccine mandate for Banner employees?

So we, as you know, here at Banner Health, take the safety of both our team members and our patients very seriously. And it was after significant deliberation that we decided to make the COVID-19 vaccine mandatory to, again, make sure that we create the safest work environment as well as the safest place that we can for delivery of care. It was with that thought that we put that into place, and we continue to stand by that rationale and look forward to being a safe place for care as well as a safe place for our team members to work.

Elisa Reznik with Arizona Public Media asks, how does the surge of cases and hospitalizations compare with Pima County's high numbers this January?

I'll have to go back and do some cross-referencing of that for that specific county. Again, I'm going to go back to my opening comments, where I shared that, again, broadly at the Arizona state level, we have 435 patients in our ICUs. And putting that into perspective, we had 484 last year at the peak of the summer surge. We'll go and get some additional detail around Pima County to share with you.

Katie Davis Young with KJAZZ Radio here in Phoenix asks, can you elaborate on the percentage of COVID-19 patients who are vaccinated or unvaccinated?

I do not have specific information that I can share with you today. We are still working on being able to provide very detailed information and accurate information on that. What I will say is that it continues to be our understanding, and our preliminary data showing us, that the vast majority, just like has been seen across the entire country, of individuals who are having COVID and being in our hospital, or having COVID and being in our ICUs, continue to be the unvaccinated.

So again, I would urge all of you that are out there who have not yet had time or gone to get your vaccine to please go and do that. The Delta variant is very transmissible, and the vaccine will protect you from hospitalization and from death.

Cameron with ABC15 asks, what type of planning are you doing in case we do experience a potential surge as far as staffing rules and procedures, et cetera?

So I'm going to refer to a couple of additional notes here with some details in regards to that. So first of all, I want to assure all of you that Banner Health has continued to be in planning mode, even as we had a lull of COVID-19 cases over the preceding months. So as far as our policies and our procedures and our responses, we continue to evaluate on a day by day basis and will continue to implement those types of activities that worked for us in the past.

We've already communicated, as an example, changes of our gating criteria as it relates to visitors. In addition to that, as I shared in my opening comments, staffing will continue to be a prime concern for us and one of our activities that we are spending a lot of time on. Right now we are doing a number of different things, and I'll provide this to all of you that are listening.

We currently have a number of openings for nurses and other support role vacancies. If you're interested in applying, you can go ahead to [bannerhealth.com/careers](https://www.bannerhealth.com/careers). In addition to that, we have done some wage adjustments, and that is to both attract and retain workers. And we've raised our minimum wage to \$15 per hour system wide. And we are also investing in nursing.

There has been a very large demand across the country related to nursing demand. And we have put efforts into place to keep them well with onsite counseling, comprehensive well-being offerings, and also raised significantly the starting pay rate for many RNs so that we can stay competitive in the marketplace. We are ramping up for full staffing and are bringing in approximately 1,500 travel nurses.

Erin O'Toole with KUNC in Colorado asks, do you have data available for cases, hospitalizations, and ICU utilization for Banner Health locations in Colorado?

We do. I do not have those statistics broken down with me here this morning. But we will go ahead and follow up. We do have those numbers for you, and we'll be happy to share them.

Peter Samore with KTR News asks, should the governor and state legislature reverse course and mandate masks in schools? And Peter is with KTR here in Phoenix.

So I'm going to go back to my opening comments and say that there are three things that all of us can do to help make sure that kids are safe in school. Number one, get vaccinated. If you're age eligible to get vaccinated, do your part and get vaccinated so we can help protect those that are too young and age ineligible at this time.

Number two, as has been suggested by the CDC and other pediatric societies, children should mask in school. And number three, very importantly because the Delta variant is so transmissible, kids should not go to school when they're having any symptoms.

Stephanie Innes from the *Arizona Republic* asks two questions, so I'll read the first question off to you, Dr. Bessel. You said 71 COVID positive pediatric patients were admitted to Banner hospitals in July, and that was double the number admitted in June. Is that correct?

That is correct.

Second question. Is that number more or fewer than the number of COVID positive pediatric patients hospitalized in Banner hospitals during previous COVID surges in Arizona?

I will have to get back on that one, too. I do not have that exact number with me here. But we will get that and follow up.

Nicole Garcia with Fox 10 News here in Phoenix asks about our nursing shortage. There is a concern of a nursing shortage. Has Banner experienced a loss of nursing staff because of burnout and/or resignations?

So the short answer to that is yes. As most all health care systems across the country have experienced, Banner Health is experiencing turnover in our nursing staff. I want to do a call out to all of those nurses and other care providers that are on the front lines. They have done tremendous work, and nurses have done tremendous work throughout this pandemic.

As I articulated in one of my prior answers, Banner Health is responding with a number of different activities to both retain as well as attract the nurses that we need to be able to be here and provide care to all of you that are in our communities. I'll rearticulate several of those that I answered in my previous response.

First of all, we have raised minimum wage for those that are in support roles to \$15 per hour systemwide. Number two, we have openings posted. If you're interested, [bannerhealth.com/careers](https://www.bannerhealth.com/careers) is where you can go and apply.

Next, we are offering a number of activities for wellness and counseling to help make sure that our nurses are doing well that are out there doing tremendous work. And also, we have increased our pay rate for starting RNs across our organization, and making sure that we're staying competitive in the market.

And lastly, we are ramping up for fall and are bringing in approximately 1,500 travel nurses to help supplement the staffing that we know that we're going to need.