

Banner Health | 8-18 press conference transcript_1

Thank you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. The first question is from Brittany Thompson at 3 TV. Her question is, how many pediatric patients are currently in the ICU with COVID?

Currently, we have 41 pediatric patients in enhanced precautions within the Banner system. I do not have the number exactly of who's in ICU. We can follow up with you afterwards if that is available.

Her next question is federal officials have said COVID booster shots were not necessary for the general public, but now we have booster shots being offered to all Americans starting September 20. What are your thoughts on that?

So that is information that has just become available this week. And we expect more information to become available and unfold. The usual process for that is that we will have both the FDA and the ACIP help guide us in understanding what is supposed to be offered.

And then from that, we will all work together to figure out how we will go ahead and make sure that that is going to be available. So we expect that we'll have more information about that in the upcoming days and weeks. And certainly, Banner's response to that need will be forwarded as we are able to get that information and formulate our own plans.

OK. Next question is from Mitch Carr at 12 News. It's a two-part question. So I'll ask the first question. Last week you mentioned a nursing shortage. I know it has only been a week, but what kind of headway has been made toward reducing that shortage?

Yes. Thank you. So as I stated, in my opening comments, we do expect throughout the rest of the pandemic and the surge that is descending upon us that staffing will be our biggest challenge. We continue to respond in the same way as I provided some detail information last week, which is continually recruiting into our core positions and securing external contracted labor. We have external contracted labor, both nurses, as well as therapists who are starting each and every week and have that forecasted out throughout the rest of the winter.

And the second part of this question is, what impact is the shortage having on Banner's coverage of patients?

So at this time, Banner continues to be open for both COVID and non-COVID patients, because we have multiple hospitals in the Arizona area, as well as in many of the other areas where we provide services. We continue to shift patients as needed to make sure that we're able to meet their needs. I want to go back to my opening remarks again and ask all of you to please get vaccinated as soon as possible. This is the way that we can help make sure that our health care systems are able to stay up and running in our usual fashion to provide care to those who need it for both COVID and non-COVID. Vaccine is our way to mitigate this.

OK. Next question is from Griselda Zetino at KTAR. Booster shots are being recommended for people who have gotten the Moderna and Pfizer COVID vaccine. What about those who got the Johnson and Johnson vaccine? Will they need a booster shot as well?

My current understanding of those that have received the J&J vaccine is that the booster shot recommendation is still not yet determined. My understanding is that the FDA will be looking at data when that becomes available and then will provide us additional information about what booster may or may not be needed for those individuals.

OK. Brian Brennan at KGUN in Tucson asks, how close to capacity are we at Banner in Arizona and Southern Arizona?

So as I stated in my opening remarks, we are continuing to see increase in our volumes. That includes both COVID and non-COVID patients. At this time, Banner Health is continuing to manage that volume by again moving patients and also getting additional staff from external contracted labor to meet that need. Again, I am going to ask all of you that are out there to help us, help us make sure that we are available to you in the way that our normal operations runs by getting yourself vaccinated and reducing the load of COVID patients within our communities.

Claudia Rupcich at ABC15 asks, you mentioned the concern about staffing shortages, can you share specific numbers? How many nurses do you need? And how many travel nurses will you bring in to help?

So as I mentioned in my opening comments, we do expect that staffing will continue to be our greatest challenge as we continue to face the surge and that we are having both increased numbers of both COVID and non-COVID patients. Previously, in my press conference, I have stated that we have a number of openings that are open in our core positions. And if there's anybody who's interested in applying for that, you can go to [bannerhealth.com](https://www.bannerhealth.com) and find us so that you can go ahead and apply.

In addition to that, with the plans that I talked about in my last press conference, those plans continue to be enacted. So we are securing external contracted labor for both nurses, as well as therapists. And we have individuals who are starting each week and expect that to continue throughout the winter.

Her final question was, when will they be here? But I think you just answered that with--

Yes. So we already have both nurses and therapists that we have secured through external contracted labor that have already begun with us. And we continue to secure those and expect those to continue to be with us throughout the winter.

OK. Mitch Carr at 12 News asks, what impact, if any, is Banner's vaccine requirement having on the ability to fill staffing shortages?

So at this time, I believe as we've spoken about here at the press conference, our deadline for all of our team members to become vaccinated is November 1. As I've shared previously, it is our intent to have all of our team members continue along with us. And we will be working with all of those if they have a medical or religious exemption to help them through that process.

Our intent is to keep all of our team members with us. In addition to that for anybody who is interested in applying for the core positions that we have, you can go to [bannerhealth.com](https://www.bannerhealth.com). And as part of your onboarding process, if you are selected to become a member of our Banner Health team, you will be required to get vaccinated as part of your onboarding process as well. We do not expect this to have a large impact as many of our other health care systems in the communities where we operate are having a very similar process and requiring for team members who are going to come into a health care system.

Nicole Garcia at Fox 10 asks, is Banner University diverting cardiac patients because of a nursing shortage in the Cardiac Cath lab?

So at Banner University, Medical Center Phoenix, we have had some disruption and our ability to provide 24/7 cath lab services to our patients. We've had some brief periods of time where we've had to go on diversion for that related to staffing challenges. Those staffing challenges have been in a couple of different types of positions that are needed to support our cath lab operations. Our operations and clinical leaders there are working very closely together to mitigate that problem. And we hope that it is a short-term issue for us.

And the second part of her question is, is the cath lab nursing shortage due to the increase in COVID patients?

As I just stated in the answer, previously, the issues that we're having in the Banner University Medical Center Phoenix Cath Lab are related to a number of different types of individuals that support cath lab operations. That is not directly related to our COVID patients.

Claudia Rupcich ABC15 asks, how does the demand and care and staffing shortage impact non-COVID patients?

So at this time, Banner Health continues to be available for both COVID and non-COVID patients. As we know from previous surges and as we would like to very much avoid, if our COVID patients overwhelm our health care systems, there may come a point where we have to reduce or cut back on other services, such as ambulatory services or patients that have planned elective surgeries. It's our absolute hope and desire to not get to that point.

And so we ask all of you who are out there listening to please do your part so that we can be here for you to take care of both COVID and non-COVID illnesses. Please get vaccinated as soon as possible. Do your part.

And the second part of her question was, what restrictions has the hospital placed or what can patients expect in terms of changes in care?

So at this time, we continue to be available for both COVID and non-COVID patients. However, we do follow gating criteria that we use to work our way through particular parts of the surge. So patients may experience things such as a reduction of visiting hours or a reduction of the number of people that can come and visit with you while you are with us.

This is in direct response to data and statistics that we follow out there in our community. Again, we ask all of you to assist us with that by getting vaccinated. The less COVID spread that we have in our communities, the more that we are able to continue in normal operations, invite people to come and visit, and have a Banner patient experience throughout our hospitalization. Getting vaccinated in our communities will help us mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and keep our hospital systems working as much as close to normal as possible.

Stephanie Innes at the *Arizona Republic* has a two-part question. The first is, just double checking that during the first two weeks of August you've had 71 COVID positive pediatric admissions, which is the same number as you had in all of July?

Yes. I just want to clarify that I believe that those are COVID enhanced precaution patients. So let us verify and make sure we have the exact correct type of patient for you. Will do that right after the press conference.