

Banner Health | 8-25 press conference transcript_1

At this time, I'll read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. First question comes from Greg Bradbury with KGUN 9. With hospital beds filling up, are there concerns about staffing the COVID-19 unit?

Yes, as I have stated in some of my previous press comments in prior weeks, staffing is going to be our most rate-limiting concern as we manage through the rest of this surge and also the entire winter. We expect to have a high load of respiratory winter pathogens. Currently, we have over-- and let me get the exact number for you here-- 1,000 bedside nursing positions that we are recruiting for and 300 other support roles.

We have brought in external contracted labor and had about 200 individuals start this week and have 140 individuals starting next week. We expect to need over 2,000 individuals to help us manage through the rest of the surge as external contracted labor.

The next question comes from Britney Thomasin with 3TV. How many current hospitalized patients are vaccinated?

So, I'll do the flip of my opening comments there. While we don't have an entire roll-up for the entire Banner system, we do have several states providing us easy access to that, which includes the state of Arizona. Today, approximately 93% of those individuals who are hospitalized with COVID are unvaccinated, which would mean that only 7% are experienced a break through infection and requiring hospitalization.

The second question from Britney is also in regard to patients that are vaccinated. Do you just use the honor system, or how do you obtain vaccination information for those patients?

We are getting our information directly from the states where we are able to get that information. Which in those statistics that I just shared, include the state of Arizona. While we often get vaccination history as part of our intake with patients, we're relying on confirmation of COVID vaccine status through those state databases.

Next question is from Howie Fisher with Capitol Media Services. I am looking for information on occupancy at various Banner facilities, including ICU and general patient care for both COVID and overall.

So, I said in my opening comments today that I was going to be a little bit less on specific data and more about what the impact of the occupancy that we were currently experiencing means for health care systems. For a more specific detail, all of our hospitals report up into the state database as required. That includes Arizona and the other states where we operate. And I would refer you to the state site for additional information today.

Dr. Bessel, the second question from Howie Fisher as well-- along the same lines, I want to know if any Banner facility is limiting elective surgeries. And if so, whether that is creating a financial hardship.

So, at this time, we do have each of our hospitals in all of our markets making a day by day decision in regard to what their elective surgery and procedural rates can be. We continue to be concerned, as I stated in my opening comments, about what the surge is doing, as well as what we are experiencing with unseasonably high rates of non-COVID care needs at this time, as well.

As we've experienced previously, it is possible that we will need to curtail elective surgeries and procedures in the future. But again, I would remind all of us that we can all have an impact on not having that happen.

Please, if you're unvaccinated, take advantage of the additional information that came out this week about the Pfizer vaccine being fully approved. Now is the day to go ahead and do your part so that all those patients, both COVID and non-COVID, can have access to the care that they need in the upcoming weeks and months.

Lilianna Salgado from Univision asked, how many nurses are you short today in total.

So, every single day and every single shift, Banner Health and each of our facilities assesses our needs and makes adjustments accordingly. So all care across the Banner system remains available and safe at this time, and we make those adjustments ongoing.

As I shared in some of the comments prior to a question, at this time, we have brought on 200 external contracted labor nurses this week. We expect 140 to start next week. Over the entire surge forthcoming, we expect to need about 2,200 of those individuals to stay with us.

We also have a number of positions that are open, both for nursing as well as nursing support roles. And if you're interested, I would refer you to [Bannerhealth.com](https://www.bannerhealth.com) to explore that career option.

Lilianna also asks, are you seeing nurses quit?

Banner Health is experiencing rates of attrition for both nursing and non nursing roles, very similar to what is being experienced across the entire United States health care system. The toll that the pandemic has taken on those that have been heroes throughout this pandemic surge, the previous pandemic surges, is really significant.

So I would ask again all of you to do your part. If you are unvaccinated and you are sharing our common error that we have in our communities, please go get vaccinated. FDA provided full approval this week for the Pfizer vaccine.

It is very sad for us whenever we have attrition of our highly skilled staff, whether it's a nurse, a respiratory therapist, or anybody else who's working in any of our care sites. And please, if you do your part to get vaccinated, we can reduce the stress that those individuals are feeling to try and help us all get through the surge of the pandemic, as well as the rest of the winter season.

Katie Davis Young at KJZZS, do you have any data on the percentage of Banner employees who were vaccinated after Banner made the vaccine mandatory?

So, I believe as I've shared previously, the deadline for all Banner employees to become vaccinated is November 1. So it is upon us that we will be 100% compliant with that mandate. That deadline is not yet here. And so we continue to work our way towards that. What I can share is that we continue to see additional individuals become vaccinated and supply their proof of vaccination to us just as we expected. And we look forward to being 100% compliant on November 1.

Liliana Salgado with Univision also asked, and I think you touched on this earlier, how many COVID patients are unvaccinated.

So as I shared earlier, for the states where we have those feeds coming through the state system, approximately 93% of all COVID patients who are hospitalized are unvaccinated. That does represent the majority average of where we are in multiple states. But we do not have that feed from every single state in every single place that we operate. But it does include Arizona data.

Nicole Greg at ABC 15 asks, Valleywise is seeing the same number of hospitalized patients in the ICU similar to what we saw in mid-february. Is this the same for Banner?

No, not at this time. But we are experiencing significant surges and hence my comments in today's press conference. I provide just a little bit of additional information on that. Our ventilator usage for COVID patients has increased by 50% over the last two weeks. Over 50% of our patients who are on ventilators in our ICUs are COVID positive. So while we are not yet at the same level that we were in the prior surge earlier this year, the increase that we are experiencing is very concerning.

So for everybody who's out there, if you are unvaccinated, please, again, additional information came to us this week. The FDA has completely approved the Pfizer vaccine. And we would encourage you to go and get vaccinated and do your part. Help us as a health care system make sure that we're here for both COVID and non-COVID patients. Do your part and get vaccinated.

Nicole also asked, do you have a percentage of kids who are hospitalized across your network with COVID-19?

I'm going to go back to the previous comment that I said in my opening statement that right now, within the Banner Health system, of our COVID hospitalized patients, approximately 5% of those are pediatric patients-- which has been a number that has been relatively stable over the past two weeks for us.

Melanie MacEachern with the Hurdle Report asks, are Banner hospitals in Arizona reporting a number of COVID-19 patients that is consistent with Banner hospitals in Colorado?

No. So, I'll provide a little bit of additional data to compare what Arizona is experiencing and what the northern Colorado area is experiencing. So, in northern Colorado, COVID-related admissions have significantly increased over the past seven days, as has the demand for ICU beds and ventilators.

Like the Arizona market, NoCo is also seeing a high volume of non-COVID patients, but the rate of increase is not exactly the same as what we are experiencing in Arizona, but it is definitely on an uptick.