

Banner Health | 9-1 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. Our first question comes from Craig Smith at KGUN-TV in Tucson. Is Banner encountering shortages of oxygen and other critical supplies, especially in Southern Arizona? So he has a three part question. That is the first question he's asking.

At this time, Banner Health has sufficient supplies, including oxygen and other critical supplies that are important for us to take care of both COVID and non-COVID patients. That includes all of our markets. I will also remind us that Banner Health operates in six different states. And that also allows us to move materials as needed from one place to another as we have surges or differing levels of materials. And we can move those to make sure that we all have adequate supplies to care for our patients.

So the next question he asks, have any facilities not connected to Banner asked for helping acquiring supplies? If so, where and what supplies?

I'm not aware of any requests that have come into our supply chain department requesting assistance with supplies at this date.

Next question comes from Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix. Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Florida, and Arkansas have less than 10% left of their ICU bed capacity according to data from the Department of Health and Human Services. How does Arizona compare to these numbers?

Yeah, so it is really disheartening to think about what is happening to those communities in the states that you asked about in your question. Certainly our hearts go out to all of those who are providing care and all of those who are ill at this time, including patients who have COVID, as well as those patients who are non-COVID patients needing services in those states that are currently overwhelmed. I'm going to go back to some of my opening comments here this morning.

We are very busy here at Banner Health we are busy caring for both COVID patients during the surge, as well as non-COVID patients who need our care. One of the reasons that we are here in front of you is to ask you to help us to not become like some of those other states. Those states often have very low vaccination rates, which leads to increased COVID surge, which leads to undue stress on the health care system that makes it unable to adequately meet the needs of the COVID patients in the surge and the non-COVID patients needing care.

We do not want that to happen in our communities. We do not want that to happen to you. Please, if you've not yet been vaccinated, get vaccinated to protect yourself from getting COVID.

Sarah Edwards from Cronkite News asks, what happens to patients when the hospitals run out of oxygen machines and ventilators? Are patients turned away or instructed to go somewhere else?

So as I stated in the previous question, at this time Banner Health has adequate oxygen, oxygen machines, as well as other critical supplies that are necessary for us to provide care to everybody out there in our communities that need it. It is our absolute desire, and we have planned, to make sure that we do not run out of oxygen or other critical supplies. We are aware in other surges in other parts of the country, as well as other parts of the world, where oxygen and other critical supplies became very scarce and they were unable to meet the needs of the patients who needed them. That included the medical needs of both COVID patients and non-COVID patients.

We're here with you today asking you to help us not get there, asking you to help yourself. If you are unvaccinated, please go and get vaccinated today to protect yourself from COVID.

Next question comes from Luke Forstner from KTAR News here in Phoenix. This is a two-part question so I will ask you the first question, Dr. Bessel. First question, what has the response been from employees regarding Banner's vaccine mandate?

Yeah, so as we've talked about here and has been communicated out, Banner Health has made the decision to make COVID vaccine mandatory for all of our employees with a deadline of November 1. Overwhelmingly, the comments that we've received have been positive. And the intent is for us, of course, to provide a safe environment for our employees as well as those that come to our hospitals, our clinics, and other care sites to receive safe care.

We do know, of course, that not everybody agrees with the decision. But we remain steadfast in making sure that we create a safe place of care for you, if you need it, and also for our employees and our team members to work in.

Second question from Luke Forstner at KTAR News. Are there expectations of some people choosing to quit because of the vaccine mandate? And how would any shortages be dealt with?

So it is not our intent to have any of our team members leave Banner Health because of the mandatory vaccination requirement, again, with a deadline of November 1. Our intent is to create a safe workplace for everybody, those that work within our workplace and those that come to us for care. So our intent is very clear. We've communicated it broadly. And we stand by that decision.

We do know that some people, of course, do not agree with that. And some people may choose to leave Banner Health. It is our desire for that to not happen. And we are working actively with employees and leaders to make sure that everybody understands the reason that we are doing this, and the safety and the efficacy of the vaccines that are available to all of us in the United States.

As with all things, we have contingency planning going on at this time as we approach a significant surge, as I've been communicating here in our press conferences. We will continue to work those plans and deploy those plans as needed to meet the care needs of COVID and non-COVID patients, along with the staffing needs that go along with that.

Next question comes from Megan McNeil at KOLD-TV, the CBS affiliate in Tucson. How is staff holding up with this new wave of COVID? I'm sure COVID fatigue and compassion fatigue are real.

COVID fatigue and compassion fatigue are very real. Our front-line health care heroes have been at this now for over a year and a half. They come to work, they take great care of our patients, and they do so with an incredible degree of compassion. But we are in a difficult part of the pandemic right now. And this pandemic part that we are in is highly related to the vaccination rates that either have or have not occurred.

We're asking everybody, please help our health care heroes. Go get yourself vaccinated and protect yourself from COVID, which will allow us to be there for you if and when you need us for both COVID needs and non-COVID needs.

Next question comes from Iram Rascon from Telemundo Arizona here in Phoenix. About one in five adults would avoid going to the hospital due to fears of COVID-19 exposure even if they are experiencing symptoms of emergency medical conditions. That's from a survey published Thursday by JAMA Network. Has Banner seen something like that? And is something being done about it?

So I am not familiar with that article yet, and so we will do some follow-up on that. But I will address the general principles of the question that was asked. So as I've spoken about here today, and in prior press conferences, we remain very busy. We are busy with both COVID patients, as well as non-COVID patients. We are seeing patients present late, either late in their disease course or late with an urgent need.

And so we ask all of you to remember that Banner Health is a safe place for care. If you need care urgently or emergently, we ask you to please come and get care. We are a safe place for care. We remain open. And we want to be here to take care of you.