

Thank you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance 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 are asking it in person.

Our first question comes from Howie Fischer over at Capitol Media Services here in Phoenix. What data do you have about where children with COVID are contracting it-- schools, family, elsewhere?

So we do not do contact tracing at Banner Health for that type of information. I would refer you to the Department of Health Services for that. I will, however, add one additional caveat to information that was shared with us from Maricopa County, and was also shared, I believe, through a press conference two weeks ago. We are very much aware that school outbreaks occurring in Maricopa County are occurring at a much higher frequency in those schools and school districts where masking mandates are not in place. We can refer that data that we have that came from Maricopa County if that would be helpful to you, or you can directly contact your Department of Health Services.

Next question comes from Liliana Salgado with Univision here in Phoenix. She asks two questions, so I will read you the first question, Dr. Bessel. Are you concerned about the presence of the new variant in Arizona?

So currently, at this time, the Delta variant is the predominant variant in the United States, as well as in the state of Arizona. I believe that 99.1% of all of the COVID variants in the United States that are being reported are the Delta variant. While the new variant is a variant of concern for the WHO, the amount that is circulating within the United States at this time is so small and the Delta is so dominant at this time that it is not currently a variant of concern for us.

So the second question, what can the new variant mean in the upcoming weeks or months?

So as I stated just previously, the Delta variant remains by far the predominant variant here in the United States, representing 99.1% of the variants that are being measured. And while the new variant is a variant of concern at the WHO level, it does not appear to be a variant of concern for us here locally, and we would not expect that to change over just the next couple of weeks.

Again, Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix asks another question. Have you noticed an uptick in hospitalizations due to COVID-19 after the Labor Day weekend?

So at this time, we have not yet experienced an uptick after the Labor Day weekend, although, of course, reflecting back over the last year and a half, that has been our experience that, after major holidays, we have experienced an increase in cases, resulting in an increase of hospitalizations and an increase of ICU and ventilator care in our hospitals. We have not yet seen that. We have remained plateaued for the last couple of weeks, for which we are very thankful.

However, I do want to remind all of us that we remain very busy, both with COVID and non-COVID patients. The number of patients that we have ventilated and in our ICUs is higher than what we experienced in last summer's surge. All of you that are out there can help us keep our hospitals open for care of COVID and non-COVID patients by getting yourself, your friends, and your family vaccinated. Please do so today if you have not yet done that so that our hospitals can remain open for everybody who needs our care.

Terry Tang with the Associated Press asks, can you give a rough estimate of how many patient transfers Banner has had to turn away from rural hospitals in recent weeks because of COVID cases taking up bed space?

I do not have that information with me here today. We can provide some information of the number of transfers that Banner Health has been receiving from any entity, and provide that to you after today's conference. We are aware that there have been issues reported of some patients needing higher level of care who have not been able to receive that. And we will provide the transfer services data that we have available with you after today's press conference.

Stephanie Innes with the Arizona Republic asks, is there any indication ivermectin could be helpful with treating COVID-19? And if so, how?

So at this time, I'm going to go back to my opening statements and reread that very specifically. At this time, ivermectin is not an FDA-approved treatment for COVID. While there are clinical trials that are going on at this time, there are no clear findings that have been released yet that confirm the drug is safe or effective, either for treatment or prophylaxis for COVID. For this reason, this drug will not be prescribed at Banner hospitals.

Shelle Jackson with KVOA in Tucson asks, you said there are unseasonably high cases of non-COVID patients in the hospital. What makes up the majority of these cases, and what do you attribute this to?

So we do not have a category that makes up the majority of those cases of non-COVID patients, but we do reflect that it is a consistent trend that is being seen across the United States, that the pandemic has had an impact on patients getting preventative care, and therefore there has been delay of treatment for some of these patients, there has been late diagnosis for some of these patients. And in addition to that, as we've spoken about the pediatric population, we are also seeing an unseasonably high amount of activity recently for RSV.

Terry Tang with the Associated Press asks two questions, so I will read you the first. Can you say how many Banner workers have submitted a religious exemption from the vaccine mandate?

So at this time, we are not at our deadline. So our deadline for all of our team members to become compliant with our mandatory COVID vaccination process is November 1st. On November 1st, everybody that works for Banner will be compliant with that process, and we will continue to be processing exemptions for the time being until we get to that deadline. So any numbers that we have today are not really applicable since we are not yet at the deadline of November 1st.

The second question from Terry Tang at the Associated Press, in relation to the first question, is there a way to screen religious exemptions and make sure they are truly sincere? There are reports that health care workers in general are seeking religious exemptions, though they may not be religious.

So a couple of statements about our mandatory COVID vaccination process. As I've stated here before in our press conference, it is Banner Health's absolute intent to have every one of our team members be compliant by November 1st with our mandatory COVID vaccination process. That includes granting individuals religious exemptions if they meet those criteria, as well as granting individuals medical exemptions if they meet that criteria.

Our exemption process for religious exemptions is designed to meet all of the legal requirements of us to make sure that we are appropriately granting individuals religious exemption if they meet the criteria. Our process is being followed very closely for that, and anybody who is going to receive a religious exemption here at Banner Health will have met all of those requirements to be granted that.

Liliana Salgado with Univision here in Phoenix is asking about an update on the nurse shortage, and any specifics on the amount of positions currently open for bedside nurses.

Sure. So as I stated in some of my opening remarks, and as well as my previous press conference remarks, we remain very busy at this time. Our patients that are in the intensive care unit on ventilators exceeds the numbers that we had in last summer's surge. That's an example of how busy we are.

In regards to where we are for staffing, staffing does continue to be our number one priority to make sure that we are positioned to meet the demands of the health care needs in our communities, as well as making sure that we're positioning ourselves in the best possible way for the forecast of increased volumes of patients that we expect to experience in the upcoming months. At this time, we currently have 1,000 core nursing positions that are open across the Banner markets. At this time, we're also recruiting 537 more contract workers. Those workers can be in a variety of different positions. That includes nursing, respiratory therapists as example. Those assignments are open to help us staff through January of this year. I'm sorry, through January of next year.

[? Melanie ?] [? McCarron ?] with the Hertel Report is also asking questions about staff shortages. She says, as we approach the fall and winter seasons, as-- I'm sorry, let me read this again. How is the outlook for addressing staff shortages as we approach the fall and winter seasons, as travel to Arizona increases? In the past years, traveling nurses are more accessible. Is Banner anticipating further difficulties with hospital staffing following the current staff shortage with the complication of Arizona's tourist season?

So as I've shared in forecasting models here at our press conference, we currently are at a plateau, and have been for about the past two and a half weeks. Our forecast models, however, do show that we will be experienced increased volumes throughout the rest of the fall and the winter season. Some of that is related to expected increases in COVID cases. Some of that is related to the seasonality of the volumes that we always experience here. And some of it, as related in the question, of course, is related to tourists who come to the state of Arizona during our winter months.

Our staffing is our number one priority at this time, to make sure that we bring in as much available staff as we possibly can to meet the demands that we know will be upon us in the upcoming fall and the winter season. As I stated in my previous comment, we currently have 1,000 core nursing positions that are open, and we're actively recruiting into those positions. In addition to that, we have 537 ECL requests out there that will be positions that will be starting between now and January to meet the winter surge that we are expecting. Those external contracted requests include individuals that we're looking to both from a nursing perspective, as well as other clinical care providers, like respiratory therapists.

We are doing everything that we can to make sure that we're going to be here to meet the needs of our community, but we do need your help. Please make sure that you're masking up when you're indoors, and also please, if you're unvaccinated, if you have family members who are unvaccinated, if you have friends who are unvaccinated, let's all go get vaccinated so that we can reduce the spread of COVID and make our hospitals easily accessible to all of those patients who are going to need us, both COVID patients as well as non-COVID patients.