

Thank you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. 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're asking it in person. Our first question comes from Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix. She asks two questions. So I will read the first question to Dr. Bessel. By how much might your workload increase with the flu season around the corner?

So we are predicting that COVID numbers, based on some of the models that we have, will start increasing again. And we're also predicting, just as I said in my opening comments, a severe flu season. Our projections is that our hospitals will be under quite a bit of stress and strain due to those increased numbers while also taking care of non-COVID and non-flu patients in those upcoming months.

At this time, we expect our peak months to be in January. And again, we ask all of you that are out there to help us. Please, if you haven't gotten vaccinated, against COVID, get your COVID vaccine as soon as possible. And as we begin to enter flu season-- and we're already starting to see some influenza cases out there in our community-- make sure to get yourself protected against influenza by getting vaccinated as well.

The second question that Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix asks-- last year we saw a decrease in flu cases due to masking and no massive events. Do you suspect this year might look different? And how will the nurse shortage make things more complicated?

Yes. So as I stated, we expect a severe flu season this upcoming flu season. We are already starting to see some early cases of influenza. What we had last year was that we were mitigating against COVID by doing things like not having large gatherings, wearing masks, working perhaps from home for those that were able to do so. And all of that also decreased the amount of COVID activity through those mitigation efforts. But those mitigation efforts also decreased the spread of influenza.

We are now in a different phase of this pandemic. Children are in school. Many people are now starting to go back into work, at least some partial part of the work week. And we're starting to have larger gatherings. Many of you are not wearing masks when you're out and about. And all of this is going to increase the potential spread of influenza. There are things that we can all do to help us in the hospital.

While we were still facing some nursing shortages to reduce the burden on hospitals, and the nurses, and the other staff that are here to take care of you. Please, if you're not vaccinated against COVID-19, get your vaccine. Get yourself vaccinated for the upcoming influenza season. And follow guidelines recommended by the CDC at this time to wear a mask while you're indoors.

Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix asks another question. We expect to have News today on the approval for a booster shot. How soon will these become available to the public here in the Valley?

Yeah. So I'm not sure if we're going to hear today. Right now, the ACIP, which is a grouping of skilled individuals that help us make sure that we get good recommendations about immunization practices, that that team is meeting. They're also meeting tomorrow. So I do expect that we will get information about boosters from that team. It might come tomorrow when they finish up their meeting.

As soon as that is done, we will look to the FDA to also issue the advice and the guidance on boosters. Expect that we will hear information for sure this week. As we get information, that will then allow other points where we have distribution and access to COVID-19 vaccines to begin to open up those schedules and those appointments for anybody who meet the criteria that ultimately get communicated from the process that I just explained. We'll look forward to communicating along with all of you, but also recommend that we all stay in tune with other news outlets that will probably inform us of the outcome of these important meetings.

Bailey Patel from KOLD in Tucson, the CBS affiliate in Tucson, asks, the Arizona Border Counties Coalition is asking the Department of Health Services to expand the surge line to allow for non-COVID acute care patients in order to relieve overwhelmed smaller rural hospitals. Would Banner be able to handle an expansion of the surge line at this time? Why or why not?

So Banner Health frequently, commonly, and even in surge situations receives transfers from hospitals throughout the state of Arizona. And it's sometimes from states and other hospitals outside of Arizona. It is our mission here at Banner Health to take care of as many patients as we can do. We've already demonstrated that throughout this COVID pandemic and are continuing to do that every single day. In normal times, we receive patients without a surge line, whether they're infectious types of patients, such as during influenza season, or whether there are other types of patients, perhaps patients needing surgical care that cannot be provided in some of our smaller hospitals both within the state and sometimes outside the state of Arizona.

We are working very closely with the Arizona Department of Health Services with our own transfer line to continue to accept as many patients as we can. It is not just the rural hospitals that are at times overwhelmed with the volume of patients, but it is really all hospitals within the health care delivery systems within the state of Arizona at this time that are very stressed, trying to meet the needs of all patients that need us, both COVID and non-COVID. We will continually work with those sending hospitals with our transfer services and in a collaborative fashion with other health care systems and with the surge line to best meet the needs of those patients.

Again, I would just repeat my opening comments here today. Everybody can help us make sure that we're here to meet your needs. Please, if you have not yet been vaccinated, get a COVID-19 vaccine today. And also remember that influenza season is already starting to descend upon us. And it's time for all of us to go ahead and get our influenza vaccines as well. This will reduce the load on our hospital systems so that we can be there for you.

Brian Brennan from KGUN 9 News, the ABC affiliate in Tucson, asks, how many patient transfers has Banner refused during our recent surge? And is this problem no longer a concern with declining trends?

So as I stated just on the previous question, Banner Health tries to take in as many patients as we possibly can. During the surge, both this time and during other parts of the surge, we are not always able to immediately accept every transfer that is requested of us. At this time, we continue to work with our other health care systems throughout the state. We work with the surge line. And we have a transfer center completely dedicated to managing the influx of patients that are needed to be transferred to some of our higher level hospitals that may have more expertise, such as surgical expertise, that a patient may need. We will continue to do that.

We also use waitlists at this time to manage for those patients that we cannot immediately assign a bed to so that we can get back to those sending facilities and get those patients in as soon as we possibly can. We want those patients to come to Banner Health. And we are working very hard to make ourselves available for that. Again, everybody out there can help us to make sure that we can be here for those patients which could potentially be you or a family member. Please, if you haven't gotten vaccinated, get your COVID-19 vaccine today. Remember, that influenza season is already starting. And it is literally just around the corner. It's time for all of us to also get vaccinated against influenza. Get your flu shot as soon as possible.

Jay Vo with Wittmann News asks, are you able to share these forecast findings from your forecast tool that you mentioned?

So we have shared some of that forecast tool internally here with Banner. We are not sharing it more broadly, as it changes and morphs all the time. A tool that can be utilized that's out there in the public is the tool IHME. That is a tool that we incorporate into some of our forecasting. The reason that we mention the forecast is to ask for your help. We do expect the hospitals, both Banner Health and those within the state of Arizona, to remain very busy and to get busier during the winter season. And yet there are things that we can do to reduce that stress.

If you have not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19, please get your vaccine scheduled. There are open appointments every single day. In addition to that, we do expect a severe flu season this winter. And we know that we have vaccines already available for that. Schedule your influenza vaccine as soon as possible.