

Bessel Press Conference 1/22

Script

This is the first time in quite a while that I've had the opportunity to start off my press conference remarks with a bit of good news. Positive COVID-19 cases are on the decline nationally and locally here in Arizona. The positivity rate in Arizona – though still very high – has also declined slightly from its peak the last week of December, and COVID hospitalizations have been going down since January 11.

While we are pleased to see these numbers trending down, we are still experiencing uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 in Arizona. The state continues to lead the U.S. with the highest rate of COVID-19 infection in the country. Cases and hospitalizations are still very high, with COVID patients accounting for 62% of hospitalizations. Our predictive models also show that our decline from this surge will take much longer than the surge we experienced during the summer. We do not expect to reach pre-surge hospitalization levels for another 10 to 11 weeks.

The number of COVID-19 patients hospitalized at Banner facilities in Arizona was at its highest on January 15. We have seen a slight decline since that time, but our hospitalizations are still 700% higher than what they were on November 1. Ventilator usage has increased by 1,000% since November 1 but has stabilized over the past week.

Pediatric COVID-19 admissions are 2 times higher than what they were during the summer surge and 9 times higher than September 2020 admissions. Almost all pediatric patients recover from this virus and we do have capacity to care for them. However, it is important to note that children are not immune to the virus and some do require treatment and hospitalization. They should also be taking the preventive measures that adults do to avoid infection and transmission.

Because of the downward trends we are seeing in cases and hospitalizations, we have made the decision to partially resume elective surgeries at Banner hospitals on January 25. Surgeries that can resume include those that are out-patient and those that require no more than a 1-night stay with no ICU care. Decisions to resume surgery will be made at the hospital level, and some may continue to delay based on capacity, staffing and other factors. As a reminder, the surgeries performed at Banner hospitals in Arizona are medically necessary procedures. If they are postponed for too long, they could turn into emergent medical issues that require hospitalization or ICU care.

Today I'd like to touch on the topic of mutations as I'm sure many of you have been hearing about these in recent weeks. Coronaviruses develop mutations frequently, even as often as every 2 weeks. There are three variants of COVID-19 that are currently under investigation – the UK variant, the South African variant and the Brazil variant. The UK variant is the only

one that has been identified in the U.S. At this time, it appears that the UK variant is more contagious than prior COVID strains, but it is not more deadly. That said, we know that the more spread that we have, the more positive cases we will see which will result in more hospitalizations and ultimately more deaths. This variant is projected to be the dominant strain in the U.S. by March. Current vaccines do appear to be effective against this strain.

As always, I will finish my opening remarks by reminding the community about what is needed from all of you to slow the spread of this virus in Arizona. We need more mitigation, more enforcement and more personal accountability from every Arizonan. Even though we appear to be on the downward slope of this long and difficult surge, mitigation can still help to accelerating our decline. We also know that targeted mitigations are effective and have been scientifically proven. They work.

We need all of you to continue to keep your circles small. Do not gather with others and please continue to wear a mask around everyone you do not live with. Make sure that it fits snugly above your nose and below your chin and avoid touching the mask while you are wearing it. Keep in mind that not all masks are created equal. Medical-grade and cloth masks with multiple layers and higher thread counts have demonstrated superior performance compared to single layers of cloth with lower thread counts. They have proven to be

effective in protecting the wearer and those around them. Masks with exhalation valves are not recommended.

In addition to distancing and masking, I'd also ask that you continue to seek out testing if you are experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19 or you have concerns about exposure. If you test positive, isolate and seek out antibody treatment if you qualify. More information about antibody treatment can be found at [bannerhealth.com](https://www.bannerhealth.com).

Lastly, please get the vaccine when it is made available to you. As I have said time and time again, the vaccine is our best way out of this pandemic. For those who have been vaccinated, continue to wear a mask and keep distance from others. The EUA issued for both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines was for the vaccine's ability to prevent serious illness in someone who has been vaccinated. We do not yet know at this time if someone who is vaccinated can still become infected and shed or transmit the virus to others. Masking and distancing will still be necessary until we have enough of the population vaccinated to reach herd immunity.

Check your state and county public health websites to learn more about vaccination phases and when the vaccine will be available to you. Please also help your loved ones schedule their appointments online, especially the elderly and those without internet access. Phone scheduling options are very limited at this time. Please keep in mind that if you would like to be vaccinated at one of the Banner Health vaccination sites,

an appointment is required. Anyone who arrives without a scheduled appointment will not be vaccinated.

One final comment I would like to make is to address the disappointing milestone that we have reached this morning, with Arizona exceeding 12,000 COVID-19 deaths. My thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones to COVID. We are going to battle with this virus every day in our hospitals and we are committed to saving as many lives as we can. Knowing that we have lost 12,000 Arizonans to COVID-19 weighs on our hearts and minds each and every day.

Thank you.