WEST VIRGINIA
HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

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STATEMENT FROM CLINICAL LEADERSHIP OF WEST VIRGINIA'S COMMUNITY HOSPITALS REGARDING CARE CAPACITY

CHARLESTON, WV – *The following statement is made on behalf of the clinical leadership of West Virginia's community hospitals.*

One year ago, West Virginia faced a frightening increase in COVID-19 cases as the winter holidays approached. In response to Governor Justice's call for limits on social gatherings, we collectively followed responsible and proven measures that reduced the spread of COVID-19, saved lives, and protected our state's health care system. Today the Governor continues to call for all West Virginians to act, as we are in this crisis together.

Projections show that for the 2021 holiday season, we will approach the highest number of COVID-19 hospitalizations in West Virginia since the pandemic began. The vast majority of patients in the ICU and on ventilators are unvaccinated and the national shortage of monoclonal antibodies has greatly restricted access to an effective treatment option. In addition, we are seeing high numbers of patients with other medical conditions requiring hospital care such as flu, heart diseases, cancer, and trauma. This combination has strained the health care system and now after nearly two years, the system is nearing a breaking point as health care workers are mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. **As a state and a nation, we are in this crisis together, and although there have been multiple calls for action in the past, we need your help now more than ever to ensure health care services are available for everyone who needs them.**

Across the state, resilient and dedicated health care workers stand ready to care for our communities, but the reality is most hospitals throughout the state have more patients in their emergency departments than they do staff to care for them. This results in longer wait times, patients being treated in hallways and waiting rooms, and diversions to other medical providers where staff has capacity to provide acute care services.

As the clinical leadership representing hospitals across West Virginia, we are asking all West Virginia residents to do their part as well as recognize the following:

- Hospitals are operating at contingency and crisis levels of care, which means waiting times are longer and staffing shortages are now the norm, impacting the availability of timely care.

- This situation is a result of our ongoing pandemic response, the serious illness of non-COVID-19 patients, national supply chain issues limiting access to effective treatments, the increased length of stay of all patients, and the resulting high number of patients in West Virginia hospitals.

- Just as hospitals' care teams have been working at capacity, our emergency medical services (EMS) and other care sites are also stressed and overworked. There may be times when capacity in the system is not adequate to accommodate the usual response and speed of transport. Also, at times patients are having to be transferred to out of state hospitals due to lack of capacity in West Virginia.

- As the pressure on hospitals and EMS increases further, we risk facing increasing delays and challenges in accessing care for everyone who needs emergency services and inpatient hospital care.

Knowing this situation, we call on every West Virginian to do their part to lessen the pressure on the health care system:

- If you are not already, get fully vaccinated. Find a location for vaccination at vaccine.gov. The evidence shows vaccines are effective at keeping people out of the hospital and off ventilators. Vaccines are free and available to those ages 5 and up at many pharmacies, doctors' offices, and health departments across the state.

- If you are vaccinated, get your booster, which is approved for everyone ages 16 and older.

- If you have questions about the vaccines, please reach out to your medical provider.

- Carefully consider where you seek health care. A primary care office, virtual health care visit, or urgent care may be the best site of care and reduces demand on limited hospital and emergency departments' staff. Despite this, **for emergency conditions such as stroke symptoms, chest pain, difficulty breathing or significant injury, you should still seek emergency care.** Know that emergency departments are doing all they can to provide safe and timely access.

- Don't delay routine medical care, physicals, and screenings. Address small problems before they become serious ones.

- Donate blood – The Red Cross is experiencing the worst blood shortage in over a decade. The dangerously low blood supply levels have forced some hospitals to defer patient care. To donate, please visit the Red Cross.

- Practice physical distance at indoor events and gatherings, including the use of face masks and other protection.

- If you are aware of a potential COVID-19 exposure, get tested and limit your interaction with others until you have a negative test and/or have passed the recommended quarantine period. For more information on free COVID-19 testing sites, please visit here. For more information on quarantine and isolation, please visit the [CDC](CDC).

- Recognize that hospital and EMS staff are shorthanded and under extreme pressure. Extend patience and thoughtfulness to those who are working the hardest to support and care for our family members and friends.

Our health care teams have worked tirelessly for the past 20 months to serve every community in our state. Now more than ever, they need your support as we are in this crisis together.

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