

Our Healthcare Workers Are at Their Breaking Point – They Need Your Help

Wendy Horton, CEO, UVA Medical Center and Mary Mannix, CEO, Augusta Health

Former Governor Ralph Northam’s declaration of a state of emergency for Virginia hospitals and Governor Glenn Youngkin’s recent emergency orders both reinforce what we have seen locally at UVA Health and Augusta Health. Our healthcare workers – your loved ones, friends, and neighbors – are at their breaking point.

After two years and four surges, COVID-19 has tragically claimed the lives and health of too many in our communities. Our care teams are exhausted, both physically and mentally. Time after time, they have stepped up through repeated surges and worked around the clock to keep our communities safe. They have identified the best ways to care for patients with COVID-19, stood up testing sites and organized mass vaccination clinics across the region to deliver hundreds of thousands of vaccine doses. No words can fully express how grateful we are for our team members’ commitment and sacrifice over these past two years.

For both our hospitals, the vast majority of our COVID patients are unvaccinated – this trend is being seen in critical care units in hospitals around the world. This has left our healthcare workers not just exhausted but heartbroken – heartbroken by caring for patients who are dying needlessly; patients who would have had different outcomes if they’d been vaccinated.

So, we are coming together to ask you, our community members, to do your part and get vaccinated and boosted to show your respect and appreciation for our healthcare workers.

We need your help. We ask you to step up right now. Our team members are facing the most serious challenge we’ve seen during this pandemic: the Omicron variant. Overwhelming our clinics and hospitals, Omicron is more contagious, easier to transmit and has caused the largest surge in COVID cases to date. With more patients with COVID in our hospitals to care for and fewer staff members to help – because they too have COVID – this latest surge is putting our ability to care for everyone in the community who needs our help in jeopardy.

Help us be there for you, for your family and for each other.

We know this isn’t the first time you’ve heard this, but the No. 1 action you can take to help is get vaccinated against COVID and receive your booster shots as soon as you are eligible. [Hospitalization](#) rates for people 12 years and older who are not vaccinated are about 8 to 10 times higher than for those who are vaccinated, and we are seeing this same trend across our hospitals. Free COVID vaccines are proven to be safe and are incredibly effective at preventing severe COVID. The booster is not an “extra” bonus shot; it is essential to attain maximum immunity against all current variants. Forgoing the vaccination and booster, quite simply, is prolonging this pandemic. If everyone in our community who is eligible becomes vaccinated and boosted, it would go a long way toward relieving the crisis our teams are facing daily in our clinics, emergency departments and inpatient units.

We also ask that you continue to wear masks – and upgrade from a cloth mask to a medical-grade mask if you are able – when out in public, and to practice social distancing. These tactics have been

shown throughout the pandemic to be effective in reducing the spread of COVID, and they remain so today.

Finally, if you are experiencing mild COVID symptoms or need testing, please talk first with your primary care provider or visit an urgent care center or testing site instead of coming to our emergency departments. With our team members stretched thin, we need to preserve the capacity of our emergency rooms for patients who are facing life-threatening emergencies and need immediate help.

As we promise to always be there to care for our patients and community members, we are asking you – our family, friends, and neighbors – to please do your part for our healthcare workers. Help us be there for you.

Wendy Horton, MBA, PharmD, is Chief Executive Officer of UVA Medical Center.

Mary N. Mannix, MBA, MSN, FACHE, is President and Chief Executive Officer of Augusta Health.