

Experts say concerted effort is needed to get past current COVID-19 surge

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While some data points suggest the state might be turning the corner on the current COVID-19 surge, health experts say a concerted effort is needed in Wisconsin to beat the delta variant.

The latest numbers from the state Department of Health Services show the seven-day average for new cases has largely been declining from the latest peak. But Dr. John Raymond, president and CEO of the Medical College of Wisconsin, says the state is likely to see “high case counts here for the next couple of months” even if the surge is diminishing.

“We actually can control how quickly the surge ends by practicing mitigation measures like masking, social distancing and avoiding crowds and most of all getting vaccinated,” he said yesterday during a WisPolitics.com virtual luncheon.

Chris Woleske, president and CEO of Bellin Health, said she’s hopeful the state can come together and move past the pandemic. But she said her “number-one concern” in the short-term is the wellbeing of the health care workforce.

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“We’ve heard this before, where ‘oh look you know, the numbers are going down,’ only to have that be a temporary situation,” she said. “I am concerned about the potential for new variants, that as we continue to see the spread ... we know there is the potential for new and even more devastating variants to come out of this.”

Dr. Susan Turney, CEO of the Marshfield Clinic Health System, said the pandemic revealed that “we are not really good at preparing for or investing in things we can’t

see.” But she said making investments in improving inequalities and the social determinants of health can help the state be better prepared in the future.

“No matter what we do to prepare for a pandemic, I think that there are going to be gaps that occur, and we are going to have to try to figure out how we’re going to manage it before we reach the point of desperation,” she said.

Karen Timberlake, secretary of DHS, says she’s “more hopeful than not” and is encouraged by leaders in health care, education and other sectors stepping up to form a coordinated response to the pandemic.

“The fact that we have more and more of those voices out in the mix, whether that’s again in mainstream media or social media or any other channels, that is part of what’s going to help us build that resolve that we really need to get all the way across the finish line,” she said.

Health systems in the state are pursuing a number of strategies to bolster an increasingly burnt-out workforce amid the current pandemic surge.

“Our workforce has been very taxed — not just by COVID-19, but by just the sheer volume of services for all the communities we serve,” Woleske said during yesterday’s luncheon.

She explained that Bellin Health has been relying more on temporary traveler workers, which can provide flexible support but come at greater cost to the employer. The health system is asking certain workers to “learn new skills and take on new goals,” including those in leadership positions.

“All of our leaders are expected to work additional after-hours shifts — weekends, nights — taking on responsibilities that they’re qualified to take on, myself included,” Woleske said.

Raymond called the industry’s workforce shortage “an urgent crisis” for the entire country. Along with supporting workers experiencing burnout and mental health issues, he pointed to advocacy efforts aimed at having people “practice at the top of their licensure and competency.”

He said physicians are assuming an “atypical role, which is being advocates for the responsible expansion of the scope of practice and licensure of non-physician providers.” He said that is particularly important in “under-resourced” urban areas

as well as rural parts of the state.

MCW is partnering with other organizations including Bellin Health and the Marshfield Clinic to “champion non-physician providers as frontline health care providers,” Raymond said. That includes physicians assistants as well as pharmacists, who are being taught at MCW how to perform physical exams along with their typical duties.

All three of these health systems have enacted COVID-19 vaccine requirements for their workers, and panelists highlighted varying degrees of hesitancy in those populations. Turney pointed to “strong resistance” among segments of the MCHS workforce including some protests, though she said a “high percentage” have been vaccinated.

“We won’t know the final numbers until the date where we required complete vaccination series for COVID,” she said, adding that some exemptions have been granted to employees ahead of the Nov. 15 deadline. “I suspect that we will lose some of our workforce as a result of the requirement that we put in place.”

Bellin Health has set the same date for its vaccine mandate, and Woleske said 82.6 percent of its workforce are currently vaccinated.

“We know that there will be people that will fall under one of the exemptions, so we don’t expect to get to 100 percent. We also know that we will have some people that will leave because of the requirement, and that’s unfortunate,” she said.

Meanwhile, 97 percent of MCW’s workforce are in compliance with its vaccine requirement, with 3 percent qualifying for an exemption for religious or medical reasons. Raymond said the vaccination status of 186 workers was unknown as of this morning, and about 12 people have submitted resignations over the mandate.

“The vast majority of our people believe in vaccination and are glad that we have mandatory vaccination,” he said. “We’re working hard with the last 186 people... Not everybody comes to the table with the same trust in science and understanding of it.”

Health system leaders in Wisconsin say the COVID-19 pandemic has shined a light on the very best and worst in human nature.

During yesterday’s virtual luncheon, Raymond says he’s seen ingenuity and

resilience among frontline health care workers as well as other essential workers in response to the crisis. He also highlighted an “unprecedented level of cooperation” among competing health systems that has helped Wisconsin “fare better” than many other states.

But at the same time, he said the pandemic has resulted in politicization of public health measures, creating an environment “in which we feel like other people are the enemy ... rather than the virus being our common foe.”

Woleske added the pandemic has increased visibility “to real talent” within health care organizations that may have gone unrecognized beforehand.

“When we faced something like this, they really rose to the challenge,” she said yesterday. “At Bellin in particular, we’ve identified people who are the next leaders in the organization. The shining stars, the people who are great at problem solving, the people who are great at communicating.”

Turney pointed to the rapid development of live-saving vaccines as evidence of the ingenuity brought forth by the pandemic.

“But there’s a downside as well. We did see many of our frailties,” she said. “We saw peoples’ instinct towards tribalism. We saw a loss in faith in science and expertise. And certainly we’re isolated from each other. And we also saw and are witnessing mental health issues skyrocket.”

Through the “inconveniences and true perils” presented by COVID-19, Turney said challenges have disproportionately affected the poor, the elderly, more isolated rural residents and underserved urban communities.

“It created many fault lines, I think, that are now very obvious in our society. And it really revealed the inequities that we have been aware of but have been magnified, as we might have been complacent about many of these things in the past,” she said.