



Testimony for the Task Force on Infectious Disease Preparedness and Response

Oct. 19, 2020

Distinguished Task Force Members, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Carrie Kroll, and I am the Vice President of Advocacy, Quality and Public Health for the Texas Hospital Association, which represents 450 of the 600 hospitals throughout Texas. Texas hospitals have been on the frontlines of the pandemic since the first case was detected in Texas earlier this year, working around the clock to ensure patients have the best possible care during the challenging, unprecedented situation. So, we very much appreciate the opportunity to be here today on behalf of these facilities.

I'd like to extend our sincere appreciation for the dedicated personnel within the Texas Department of State Health Services that are working day and night to support our hospitals in their quest to provide uninterrupted patient care during this pandemic. The agency has done a tremendous job under a great amount of stress and are thankful that they are such leaders in the public health space. Many team members have come to feel like family as we've spent day after day in constant communication discussing the situation on the ground and how to best target resources for hospitals in the hardest hit areas of the state.

As it relates to the state's COVID-19 vaccination plan, THA stands ready to be of assistance in helping to coordinate distribution and administration of the vaccine. While we are proud of all first responders during this time and understand the importance of vaccination as a form of protection, we ask that priority focus be placed on vaccinating those health care workers and first responders at most risk. Identifying different levels of priority within categories of first responders will ensure that those individuals most likely to come in direct contact with an infectious individual will be protected from the disease.

Texas hospitals play an important role in the vaccination process. We are contracted to provide mandatory vaccinations through the Texas Vaccine for Children Program and provide recommended vaccinations through the Adult Safety Net program. Our network of hospitals and clinics exist to provide primary care services to individuals throughout Texas. We house a tried and true network of vaccinators that stand ready to assist in administering the COVID-19 vaccination. As proud public health partners and we look forward to coordinating with DSHS as they make plans to roll out this vaccination.

There is a tremendous amount of variety in terms of the vaccines being readied for FDA approval each with different levels of complexity in terms of number of doses and specificity in terms of storage. The hospital industry is well versed in responding to complex pharmaceuticals and we ask you to rely on us as a partner to fine tune planning once the state's initial vaccine allocations come into focus.

Hospitals have gone to great lengths to expand hospital capacity to ensure infectious patients are cared for at the highest levels within the hospital walls. That has meant stretching our resources to bring online specialized critical care units with all of the staff and equipment necessary to provide patient care. Staffing has been, and continues to be, a great need in areas with elevated COVID-19 transmission rates and hospitalizations. That's because not only have we added beds, but we also have to take staff offline if they are exposed or become ill. The stress of the pandemic also has taken an unimaginable emotional toll on these same workers. These factors combined have made it difficult for hospitals to have a full suite of caregivers on any given day. We are thankful for the Governor, DSHS, TDEM and our Hospital Preparedness Partners for their assistance in identifying and quickly deploying staffing resources areas with high hospitalizations to provide necessary bedside care. We anticipate that staffing will continue to



be a need as this pandemic unfolds and appreciate the constant communication and work with these partners to ensure we preserve hospital capacity throughout Texas.

The hospital industry is well versed in flexing their facilities to meet the needs of patients at any given time, and that's no different in a pandemic. No Texan should delay or go without care during this time. While non-COVID-19 patients have returned to hospitals after the state's initial shut down in March, we continue to worry that people who miss needed treatments and medically necessary procedures will wind up sicker when they eventually do show up for care. We very much appreciate the flexibility we've been given by the Governor to provide routine, medically necessary and sometimes life-saving care while balancing the immediate needs of the COVID-19 population.

We know that this pandemic is far from over but are hopeful for the protection provided by a vaccine and continue to marvel at the scientists working daily to uncover new therapeutics and possibly one day a treatment for this disease. In the meantime, Texas hospitals stay focused on providing care to patients with COVID-19 while continuing to educate the community on the power they have to decrease transmission by wearing masks and staying socially distanced. We ask that you put the critical needs of health care workers top of mind as we continue to work together on a vaccine plan, staffing and other issues going forward. Frontline workers have been nothing short of heroic and we must continue to protect them.