



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Health and Social Services

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER

3601 C Street, Suite 902
Anchorage, Alaska 99503-5924
Main: 907.269.7800
Fax: 907.269.0060

September 10, 2021

Dear Alaska Health Care Providers,

Thank you for your tireless and life-saving work caring for Alaskans during these challenging times. This has been hard in so many ways, and I know many of you are struggling as the pandemic continues and we care for our fellow Alaskans. This pandemic has impacted us all in different ways – some have been minimally affected while others are overwhelmed. Many providers, we know, are making incredibly challenging clinical decisions every day with limited staff and reduced supply chains as most of our hospitals are almost always at or above capacity.

This has been long and hard, but Alaska's health care providers continue to rise to the challenge. I love working side by side with some of you in the Emergency Department, hearing concerns from others and learning from our collective experience and expertise.

I see and feel your exhaustion, and I hear directly from many of you. I want to personally thank each of you for all that you continue to do under the extraordinary circumstances of this pandemic. Thank you for your continued compassionate care for Alaskans.

Besides taking a moment to say thank you, I also want to provide an update on what we are doing at the state level and offer resources that may be able to help you, your patients, and the larger health care community.

Rising Cases and Data Backlogs

I wish I could deliver better news, but unfortunately, due to the delta variant, COVID-19 cases are continuing to surge. We currently have more people hospitalized due to COVID-19 than at any other time in the pandemic. Every borough and census area in our state is now at a high-alert level. Everyone working on the COVID-19 response is struggling to keep up; testing lines are long in many areas, lab results are delayed due to the large volume of samples, reporting and entering of cases is backlogged, and contact tracing is delayed to the point that we are again asking Alaskans to notify their own close contacts and provide information.

We're working to find more help to speed up the process, but please keep these delays in mind when you're looking at data. To get the most accurate picture of COVID-19 trends in Alaska, please view cases by symptom onset date, not reporting date (look at the second tab below the graph on the [cases dashboard](#)).

How Health Care Providers Can Help Fight COVID-19

Here are some ongoing ways providers can support Alaska's response:

- **OFFER TESTING:** More testing is needed. If you aren't already involved in providing COVID-19 testing to your community and you'd like to start, please email coleman.cutchins@alaska.gov. If you have a testing site that you'd like added to Alaska's testing locator map, please email collin.johanknecht@alaska.gov.
- **PROMOTE AND PROVIDE VACCINES:** Many Alaskans would like to receive COVID-19 vaccine from their regular health care provider. If you're interested in becoming a vaccine provider, please visit this [DHSS webpage](#). If wasting doses because you only need one or two doses out of a vial has prevented you from becoming a vaccine provider, please know that at this point in the pandemic, wasting some vaccine is acceptable to quickly vaccinate more Alaskans.
- **OFFER MONOCLONAL ANTIBODY TREATMENT:** These medications are currently being distributed throughout Alaska and are widely available for persons at [high-risk](#) for more serious outcomes. The State has a supply of both Bamlanivmab/Etesevimab and Casirivimab/Imdevimab (the Lilly antibody and the Regeneron antibody) available at no cost for distribution. Please contact cj.kim@alaska.gov to request these products for your patients, or if you need assistance or have questions.
- **PROVIDE RELIABLE EVIDENCE-BASED INFORMATION TO PATIENTS:** There is a lot of information out there and unfortunately, not all of it is accurate or helpful. In these confusing times, Alaska's health care providers are playing a critical role by relaying accurate and timely information to patients. Please ask us if you have any questions. We're here to support you and serve the people of Alaska. If you have questions for us, the CDC or the FDA, we'll do our best to get you the information you need as quickly as possible. Please also let your patients know they can join us on our weekly [Public Health Science ECHO](#) where we provide updates on COVID-19 for the general public.
- **JOIN US FOR A WEEKLY MEETING:** The Division of Public Health, in coordination with the University of Alaska Anchorage, Center for Human Development, holds a weekly ECHO videoconference Thursdays from noon to 1 pm to review current literature and provide situational awareness about the pandemic to clinical staff. [Register](#) to attend or fill out a participant feedback [survey](#) to help us make these meetings as productive as possible. They are also recorded and you can find the recordings [here](#).
- **SUBSCRIBE TO DHSS NEWSLETTERS OR PUBLICATIONS:** Please see the end of this letter for a comprehensive list of publications. The *COVID-19 Alaska Clinical Update* may be of the most interest to health care providers. These summary updates of recent data and research for health care providers are typically published weekly or biweekly. Please subscribe [here](#).
- **ALASKA RESPOND:** Please sign up for [Alaska Respond](#) if you or colleagues you work with would be willing to help vaccinate, work in a school or be a part of a strike team. This is our tool to ask for help –

there is no obligation to help, but it might be a great chance to see a new part of the state and use your skills in new ways.

State Support to Providers

We know how difficult the situation is right now in Alaska's health care facilities and want to provide support in any way we can. Our current efforts include the following:

- **ENCOURAGING COVID-19 PREVENTION STRATEGIES:** Now is the time for Alaskans to redouble their efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This includes practicing layered prevention such as getting vaccinated (and getting a third mRNA dose for those who are immunocompromised), wearing a mask when indoors in a community at a high or substantial alert level, social distancing, keeping social circles small, testing when warranted, getting monoclonal antibodies for high-risk people who test positive and isolating or quarantining for those who test positive or are identified as a close contact. These mitigation measures are important now for all Alaskans.
- **HOSPITAL STATUS DASHBOARD:** DHSS, with the Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association (ASHNHA), now operates an internal dashboard, hospitalstatus.alaska.gov, showing a more robust view of each facility's capacity to accept patients. This link is intended to be shared among Alaska's health care providers but is not meant for public use.
- **DAILY CALL WITH TRANSFER CENTERS:** DHSS and ASHNHA facilitate daily morning huddles with Alaska's hospitals to share situational awareness about cases and hospital capacity to assist with load leveling.
- **GSA CONTRACT FOR ADDITIONAL STAFF:** On September 3, DHSS submitted requests for proposals to four companies identified by the U.S. General Services Administration asking for medical support staff from other states. In total, we are requesting to contract 473 nurses, patient care technicians, respiratory therapists, and other health care personnel from FEMA Region 10 (Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho). The companies have 10 days to respond to the RFP. We cannot guarantee we will receive all personnel requested but we will strive to contract as many as we can to provide relief to Alaskans.
- **LICENSING AND BACKGROUND CHECKS:** The health care boards under the Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development (DCCED) have created Emergency Courtesy Licenses to expedite the licensure process as much as possible, but this process will still take time. At the same time, DHSS is implementing an expedited background check process and waiver for licensed providers who are seeking to work in certain licensed facilities in Alaska, such as hospitals.
- **CNA TRAINING AND RELIEF:** The Multistate Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC) legislation will allow registered and practical nurses holding multistate licenses from any of the 38 participating jurisdictions to avoid a separate Alaska licensure process and begin work immediately. These are fully licensed

nurses who, under the multistate compact, have to meet a higher standard than Alaska's own laws require, which protects the health and safety of Alaskans.

- **ALTERNATE CARE SITES:** Under the federal Public Health Emergency, DHSS received the CMS 1135 waiver that allows for certain Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA) flexibilities. The authorities within the CMS 1135 waiver extend to hospitals. Some hospitals are using alternate care sites within their hospital or on their campus to manage their patients. Some EMS agencies will start Mobile Integrated Healthcare to support load leveling by treating on scene or transporting to alternate destinations of care, if appropriate, and help decompress hospitals via home monitoring visits.
- **MEDICAL SUPPLIES:** DHSS continues to procure medical supplies to support hospitals that are unable to purchase items due to supply chain constraints. The state can bulk purchase and share resources with health care providers as well as support movement of supplies and medications around the state as needed.
- **CRISIS CARE COMMITTEE:** DHSS is establishing a structure and process for a committee to meet and provide recommendations on actions to address hospital capacity constraints. The Crisis Care Committee will have 15 representatives from across the state.

Also, today, the governor's telehealth legislation, Senate Bill 3006, passed the Senate. This legislation would temporarily allow out of state health care providers to offer telehealth and telemedicine services to patients in Alaska without holding an Alaska license as long as they are licensed in good standing in another jurisdiction. Thank you, Alaska Senate, for passing SB 3006!

Prioritize Your Own Mental and Physical Health

When an airplane cabin loses pressure, we are asked to place the mask over our own mouth and nose before assisting others. Please take care of yourselves so you can continue to take care of others. I realize this pandemic may be feeling endless right now, but no pandemic lasts forever. Please seek help if you need it. Here are some resources to keep in mind if you need them:

- **AK RESPONDERS' RELIEF LINE:** Recognizing the unique stressors that providers face, the Division of Behavioral Health established a confidential 24/7 support line, (844) 985-8275, for health care and behavioral professionals impacted by COVID personally and professionally. Staff supporting the call line recognize callers are often first responders and will allow callers to openly express their experiences and feelings serving Alaskans impacted by COVID. This service is also available to immediate family members of first responders who may be experiencing stress, anxiety and other hard to label emotions as a result of their loved one engaging on the front lines.
- **CARELINE ALASKA /NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE:** If you are feeling hopeless or having thoughts of self-harm or suicide, reach out for help right away. Call the [Careline Alaska](#) at 877-266-

September 10, 2021

Page 5

4357 or text 4help to 839863 (3-11 pm Tuesday-Saturday). Or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.

- **RESILIENCY RESOURCES:** More resiliency resources can be found on the [DHSS resiliency webpage](#) and the [Bounce Back resiliency resources webpage](#).

Lastly, please seek creative ways to share the burden. If you have energy and the time, please work to support your fellow health care workers by expanding care so the burden can be shared and lightening the load on those most affected. Perhaps a surgical center could close one day a week so medical staff can help support the local hospital? For EMS, please consider transporting to urgent care centers or alternate care sites to relieve wait times in our emergency departments. For retiring nurses or nurses seeking a change, consider working in our schools as a school nurse. For all hospital staff, please work to involve the support of non-clinical staff in securing supplies, assisting with patients whenever possible and providing patient education.

Thank you for all you do!

We are so incredibly grateful for all that you do. If you have ideas to share, please feel free to email me at anne.zink@alaska.gov or text or call me on my cell at 907-444-9516. We're all in this together. Each of us has needed help and support at different times during the pandemic and one thing I love about Alaskans is that we genuinely care for each other and do our best to rise to meet difficult circumstances. As I often say, "Alaskans know how to do hard things." We are here for you and wish you the very best.

With gratitude,



Dr. Anne Zink, MD, FAACP

Chief Medical Officer

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services

Additional data resources

- **Alaska COVID-19 Data Information Hub (Data Hub):** The dashboards located on the COVID-19 Data Hub are updated around noon Monday-Friday. Almost every data point on the hub can now be selected down to the borough and census area, and community level data can always be extracted in

the Summary Tables. The data hub can be accessed [here](#) (best supported by Chrome, Firefox, Safari or Edge).

- **COVID-19 Website:** Even though the DHSS website remains partially unavailable due to a cyberattack, many pages are now back online. Access our COVID-19 website [here](#).
- **COVID-19 Presentations and Reports:** The COVID-19 data hub presentations and reports [archive](#) is another location to find recent presentations and reports. Most publications mentioned here can be found in this archive.
- **COVID-19 Severe Outcomes Update:** The most current monthly report summarizing hospitalizations and vaccine breakthroughs can be found [here](#).
- **Alaska COVID-19 Summary:** We have resumed Monday-Friday data summary emails while cases are high. You can receive them via email by subscribing to them [here](#). This same information is also posted Monday-Friday on the [DHSS Facebook page](#) and [Twitter](#).
- **COVID-19 Weekly Case Update:** Weekly updates summarizing Alaska's COVID-19 trends are published weekly and can be emailed to you by subscribing [here](#). These are also posted weekly on the [DHSS Facebook page](#), [Twitter](#) and in the Data Hub presentations and reports [archive](#).
- **COVID-19 Alaska Clinical Update:** These summary updates of recent data and research for health care providers are typically published weekly or biweekly. Subscribe [here](#). These are also posted weekly in the Data Hub presentations and reports [archive](#).
- **DHSS ECHO Videoconferences:** Many public meetings are held each week to support health care providers and the public. We encourage you to send community members who have questions to these ECHOs. A full list can be found [here](#). We also do pop-up ECHO videoconferences as needs arise.
- **Alaska Section of Epidemiology Bulletins:** Subscribe [here](#).
- **Alaska Public Health Alerts:** Subscribe [here](#).