How Baptist Health weathers COVID-19 surges in Florida

NOV 12, 2021

Marc Zarefsky
Contributing News Writer

Florida has seen more than 3.65 million positive cases of COVID-19 and nearly 60,000 deaths related to the virus, both of which are the third highest totals of any state. A major catalyst for those numbers was a Delta-driven surge this past summer. At its peak, Florida recorded three straight weeks with more than 150,000 new COVID-19 cases, including multiple records of the most cases in a single day anywhere in the U.S.

In October, the Florida Hospital Association announced that the summer surge was over, and data analyzed by *The New York Times* showed that as of the end of October, Florida thankfully had a lower recent-case rate than any other state in the country.

In a recent episode of “AMA Moving Medicine,” Bernie Fernandez, MD, CEO of Baptist Health Medical Group, and Bill Ulbricht, chief operating and administrative officer for the clinical enterprise division of Baptist Health South Florida, spoke about how their medical group navigated the summer surge.

Recognize the importance of mental health

At Baptist Health, an AMA Health System Program member, the leadership team realized the toll the ongoing pandemic was taking on its employees. After all, during that August peak, Florida had back-to-back weeks where more than 1,500 people died from COVID-19—more than any other time in the pandemic. That can be a hard statistic to read, but it was even harder to witness firsthand.

“We’ve always been—you’ve got to work through it, you’ve got to be tough, you’ve got to suck it up, and that’s not totally true,” Dr. Fernandez said. “This has really brought to light the tremendous stress and mental health issues that could be underlying.”
Baptist Health sought to offset the ongoing strain being put on its employees by naming the group’s first chief well-being officer. Ana Viamonte Ros, MD, was appointed to lead an initiative to make mental health wellness and overall well-being a priority within Baptist Health. Her responsibilities include developing a systemwide strategy and support program to help all employees who were plagued by stress, anxiety, exhaustion or depression.

The goal was to give employees an outlet to turn to, while at the same time assuring them there would be no stigma associated with coming forward.

“We’re talking about it more freely amongst all of us as leaders,” Dr. Fernandez said. “That alone has given the organization a wonderful lift. We’ve got a lot more work to do. This is not something that just comes with a pandemic. It’s something that we need to continue to concentrate on.”

Learn more with the AMA about why half of health workers have reported burnout amid COVID-19.

Focus on science, not politics

Masking and vaccine requirements have been a hot-button topic across the country throughout the pandemic, particularly in Florida. Dr. Fernandez said that a common trait among the majority of Floridians who tested positive or died from COVID-19 during the summer surge was that they were unvaccinated.

Ulbricht said that at Baptist Health, the focus has been on science and trying to stay out of politics.

“We are going through that process of following the science … and making decisions based on the knowledge that we gain,” Ulbricht said. “We have significant input from our physicians to help us make those decisions. It’s not administrators making decisions.

“Our belief within Baptist is we take care of our patients,” he added. We take care of our teams. We take care of our providers. We take care of our communities.”

Dr. Fernandez agreed.

“Every decision that we make has to be based on what’s best for that patient,” he said. “When those patients are under our care, if we believe that wearing a mask or getting vaccinated is the best thing for that patient, and we have seen the science around it, that’s what we go for.
“Our employee safety and our patient safety are paramount to us.”

Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines and variants, and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.” You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA's YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.