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Joint Statement from Blount Memorial Hospital, Covenant Health, East Tennessee Children's Hospital, Sweetwater Hospital Association, Tennova Healthcare and The University of Tennessee Medical Center

Knoxville, Tenn. (Sept. 1, 2021) – The past 18 months have been difficult for everyone in many ways, and the surge in COVID-19 infections over the past months has been exceptionally challenging. We have seen a sharp rise in delta variant-related infections, and community hospitalizations have exceeded the COVID-related census we witnessed in January 2021. We are all anxious to get past the coronavirus pandemic.

We continue to believe that vaccination is the fastest and most effective way out of the pandemic. With this belief, our hospital organizations are joining together to urge everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Across our health systems, more than 80% of people who are hospitalized due to COVID-19 are unvaccinated. Many have avoided getting vaccinated because of myths or misinformation about vaccine safety. However, vaccine testing, clinical trials and worldwide results show that the vaccine is safe and effective. It greatly reduces the likelihood of contracting or spreading the virus, being hospitalized, or dying as a result of COVID-19. It also significantly lowers our communities' risk of experiencing another viral surge. If you are hesitant about receiving the vaccine, please discuss your concerns with your health care provider so you can make an educated decision based on factual information.

Not only are we once again facing significant increases in the number of COVID-19 cases, we are also facing a shortage of health care workers in the U.S., and Tennessee is no exception. Staffing is lower now than before the pandemic began, and several of our health systems have enlisted the help of the Tennessee National Guard to help alleviate this staffing crisis. Even with this assistance, as more people come to our hospitals, we still have fewer health care professionals to provide care.

Unfortunately, we acknowledge that patients in our ERs are experiencing longer wait times because of higher numbers of emergency cases and more people seeking COVID-19 testing and treatment. Our dedicated physicians and hospital staffs are working hard to care for COVID-19 patients as well as those who are experiencing heart attack, stroke, and other life-threatening illnesses and conditions. A significant amount of our hospitals' current bed capacity is being used by COVID-19 patients. We all need to do our part to prevent the escalating spread of the virus to make sure local hospitals are here when you need us, regardless of the type of care you need. We know that anxieties and emotions can be high during hospital visits. We appreciate your patience and ask that you treat our health care heroes with the kindness and respect they deserve.

If you are experiencing mild symptoms such as a low-grade fever, cough or sore throat, or you need COVID-19 testing, we encourage you to call your health care provider or go to an urgent care facility rather than coming to the ER. However, if you have a serious injury or a life-threatening illness or condition, don't hesitate to seek emergency treatment. Our collective commitment is to be there when you need us most. Be assured that our teams are working tirelessly and selflessly to provide you with the care that you need.

We are doing everything we can to manage the current increase in COVID ER visits and hospitalizations while also caring for the ongoing, non-COVID-19-related health care needs of our communities. To make an immediate impact on slowing the spread of the virus and to reduce the burden on our health systems, we encourage mask wearing and social distancing when in public. Again, we strongly encourage everyone who is eligible to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Now is the time to come together as a community to protect ourselves and one another. Our entire region has experienced suffering and loss, but the spirit of East Tennesseans is as strong as ever. Thank you for embodying that strong spirit and for entrusting your care with our health care systems.

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