



600 13TH ST., NW, SUITE 500
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
p | 202-753-5500
f | 202-347-5147

16011 COLLEGE BLVD., SUITE 250
LENEXA, KS 66219
p | 913-262-1436
f | 913-262-1575

WWW.CHILDRENSHOSPITALS.ORG

August 26, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

On behalf of America's over 220 children's hospitals, thank you for your tireless efforts to move our nation beyond COVID-19. The current surges are having a unique and significant negative impact on children, and we ask for your immediate help to address the growing national pediatric hospital capacity crisis. We urge strong steps now to provide critical support for pediatric hospital capacity and encourage broad adoption of prevention strategies, such as masking and vaccinations, to protect our nation's children.

Children's hospitals are reporting high demand and staffing challenges. With pediatric volumes at or near capacity and the upcoming school season expected to increase demand, there may not be sufficient bed capacity or expert staff to care for children and families in need. The current impacts to our nation's pediatric hospitals must be considered as we quickly develop local, state and federal responses to serve and protect children. As COVID cases increase for children, it is still less likely for them to require hospitalization, but the increases in COVID needs combined with the challenges below are putting significant pressure on pediatric hospital capacity.

First, the pediatric health care system is financially strained, which affects our ability to nimbly mitigate the impact of the current surge on children. Many children's hospitals continue to carry significant losses from earlier in the pandemic when the national shutdown significantly reduced volumes. As the highest Medicaid hospitals in the nation, children's hospitals serve the most economically challenged and diverse communities and are still awaiting additional provider relief funding (PRF) to remediate their losses and stabilize their finances.

Second, a national children's mental health crisis, well underway before the pandemic, has been exacerbated significantly by the disruption of social interaction and daily routines of school and family life experienced through the pandemic. Layer on the financial stress on families and COVID-19 illness and death, and the existing pediatric mental health capacity in inpatient and outpatient settings across the nation is being overwhelmed by children presenting with serious and severe mental and behavioral health needs.

Third, the annual fall/winter viral cycle did not occur with any material impact over the past winter, given masking and minimal interactions among children. However, the cycle began unexpectedly this summer, months ahead of the usual schedule, with a severe wave of RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) putting many children in the hospital, with infection rates and severity continuing to rise as children reengage after the extended isolation of the past year. While experts are divided on how long the trend will continue, the immediate impact is clearly producing substantial pressure on pediatric hospital capacity.

Lastly, the pandemic has taken a toll on staff working in children's hospitals. Children's hospitals' professional staff require additional specialized training to care for infants and young children, where equipment, drug dosing,

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procedural preparation and patient/family communications—even food service and environmental services—are all very different from the care of adult patients. Pediatric-trained staff are costlier as a result. The combined COVID-19 and behavioral health pandemic has increased work stress and “burn out,” which was already a major challenge to recruitment and retention. With staff rethinking their careers and greater competition for the remaining talent, children’s hospitals are reporting shortages which are exacerbating capacity constraints.

All of these factors are converging and unfortunately setting up the perfect storm threatening national pediatric hospital capacity. We ask for immediate support for pandemic-driven staffing cost increases through federal pediatric emergency assistance, specifically the release of provider relief funding and any other federal workforce support that can be quickly distributed and targeted to pediatric crisis response.

We strongly support and advocate for stronger masking and vaccination guidance. We know these prevention strategies are critical to safeguarding the health of our nation’s children and families and preventing hospitalizations. We are working as a children’s hospital community to amplify and encourage these strategies at the local, state and national levels, collaborating with and supporting the work of your HHS agencies through our hospitals. We ask you to continue to prioritize the development and roll out of a vaccine for children under 12 years of age so all children have the opportunity for virus protection.

We look forward to continuing our work across your administration partnering and informing surge response. We appreciate your administration’s tireless active engagement with us at all levels, as it will take all of us working together and all the might of the federal government to stem this rising tide.

Thank you for everything you are doing, and with very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Wietecha". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "W".

Mark Wietecha
Chief Executive Officer
Children’s Hospital Association