

Oneida Health Community Update

As I write this update, my intent is pretty straight forward. Communicate to those community members who choose Oneida Health for their care, our current situation and how it may impact the delivery of care today as well as into the immediate future.

The current healthcare environment in Upstate New York is a very challenging one. Not just because of the Delta Variant and its impact on healthcare demand (which is significant), but because of a widespread shortage of qualified staff throughout Upstate New York as well as in many states throughout our Country.

Oneida Health currently has an overall average employee vacancy rate above 10%, and in some positions, the percentage is above that. We have done and will continue to do what we can to attract and retain staff. There is always the request for higher compensation and retention bonuses, which we are pursuing understanding that in the end, that all needs to be paid for. Unlike most businesses, we in healthcare cannot increase what we bill (and are actually paid for) to offset the increase in operating expenses as the majority of our payment rates are set by the government. As we continue to spend significant dollars in recruitment and retention, it is important that we keep a watchful eye on finances. Failure to do just that will result in a financial crisis which is not in the best interest of healthcare in our area (no margin, no mission).

Oneida Health today is a high quality provider of care in the hospital, in the long term care facility as well as its many primary care and specialty practices. We have great pride in the fact that we are regularly recognized for some of the highest patient outcomes and patient satisfaction in all of NY State and the Country.

With the above said, we now face a new challenge that could very well result in a healthcare crisis for our community and region. The new COVID vaccine mandate for healthcare providers and staff may in the end, result in reducing capacity for care. This includes Emergency, Inpatient, Outpatient Diagnostics as well as access to Long Term Care. At this point in time, the Syracuse and Utica hospitals have reached capacity limits which has resulted in our transferring patients who require specialized care to Albany, Binghamton, Rochester and Buffalo. The problem is the facilities in those cities will be negatively impacted by the vaccine mandate as their staff may resign tightening their current capacity. That will create a larger burden on providers as well as community members who may not receive care as timely as they are used to or in the area they call home. Ambulance services are also facing a similar staffing shortage; each lengthy transfer puts a strain on their ability to respond to emergency calls.

I assure you we are preparing for worst case scenario, that is, the majority of unvaccinated staff will leave employment in healthcare. Understand though, the impact of this will be experienced by all healthcare providers for the foreseeable future. Longer wait times to be evaluated as well as delays in testing availability will be more common.

Please understand, the majority of our staff (i.e. 88%) are vaccinated. Those that currently are not vaccinated are needed for Oneida Health to continue to provide care in the manner you have been accustomed to. Although I support receiving the vaccine, I respect the right of individuals to choose whether to receive the vaccine. With that said, regulations will not allow unvaccinated staff to work beyond September 27th. So, if those staff are not permitted to work, together with our current vacancy rate, even though we will do all that is humanly possible to continue to meet your healthcare needs locally, there will be an impact on our ability to provide care as we are able to today.

I will close with a huge Thank You to the providers and staff of Oneida Health and also those in our region. They have been battling a terrible pandemic for 18 months with no end in sight. In addition, these talented individuals have met head on the challenges of higher patient acuity caused by the delay in care from the onset of this pandemic. Yes, they are tired and I know many are wondering deep inside, how long can I keep this up?

As community members who have the occasion to access care, please share your gratitude to these dedicated staff. Your continued patience and understanding is so greatly appreciated. We will continue to be here for you, 24/7/365.

Thank you for the privilege of caring for you.

Sincerely,



Gene F. Morreale
President and CEO