

December 14, 2021

Open Letter about COVID-19 from West Virginia Health Leaders: Please Get Vaccinated and Boosted

One year ago, we wrote to you when the first COVID-19 vaccine was on its way to our Mountain State. The authorization of a safe and effective vaccine was a milestone time in our careers, bringing hope and relief during this life-changing pandemic.

A year later, we have seen hundreds of thousands of West Virginians choose COVID-19 vaccination, alongside millions across the United States and billions around the world. For more than a year, COVID-19 vaccines have had the most rigorous safety monitoring of any vaccines in U.S. history. The scientific and medical evidence continues to reinforce that vaccination is safe, and it is highly effective at reducing risk of hospitalization and death from COVID-19.

We trust COVID-19 vaccines because we have followed the science, and we see firsthand each day the role vaccination plays in protecting ourselves, our loved ones, and our patients. Without a doubt, countless lives have been saved through COVID-19 vaccination. This is why we have chosen to get the vaccine and why we recommend it to our patients.

We have made strides toward improving public health in the face of an ever-changing pandemic. We still have a pressing concern, though: West Virginia's COVID-19 vaccination rates are among the lowest in the nation, increasing our hospitalization rates from COVID-19.

When vaccination rates in a community are low, the virus that causes COVID-19 can more easily spread and change into new strains—these are the “variants” you may be hearing about, such as Delta or Omicron. New variants could be more contagious, cause more severe illness, or could even develop in ways that allow it to overcome the vaccines that are working so strongly for us now. The spread of variants has contributed to recent increases in hospitalizations and deaths in West Virginia.

We know that the overwhelming majority of people who are now hospitalized or pass away from COVID-19 are **unvaccinated**. Although no vaccine is 100% effective at preventing disease or complications from disease, the COVID-19 vaccines are our strongest tool to protect against severe illness and death.

If you have not yet chosen vaccination, please get vaccinated. West Virginians 5 years of age and older can now get protected against COVID-19. And if you were vaccinated more than 6 months ago with Pfizer or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines, or more than 2 months ago with a Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, please get a booster shot. Boosters are an important step to maintain maximum protection against the virus and its variants.

Vaccines are readily available at multiple locations across all 55 counties. You can learn more and find a location near you at vaccinate.wv.gov.

One year ago, we wrote to you about how we wept with the families we cared for and served, watching them struggle with severe illness and death from COVID-19 complications. Many who

survived continue to have symptoms weeks and months later—what you may have heard referred to as “long COVID.” The images and memories of these West Virginians – some of whom are our neighbors, colleagues, patients, or loved ones - remain and will stay with us for our lifetimes.

It is devastating to see people suffer from what is now a vaccine-preventable illness. Yet just as we were a year ago, we remain hopeful. We know now more than ever that the COVID-19 vaccine is our key to protect ourselves and end this pandemic—only if we all choose it. West Virginians, protect yourself and others from COVID-19. Please get vaccinated and boosted.

Sincerely (listed alphabetically),

Sven T. Berg, MD, MPH
Chief Executive Officer, Quality Insights

Kenneth Canipe, PharmD, BCPS, BCCCP
President, West Virginia Society of Health System Pharmacists

Lisa M. Costello, MD, MPH, FAAP
President, West Virginia Chapter American Academy of Pediatrics

D. Scott Davis PT, MS, EdD
President, West Virginia Physical Therapy Association

V.J. Davis, RS, MS
President, West Virginia Association of Local Health Departments

Laura Davisson, MD, MPH, FACP
Governor, American College of Physicians West Virginia Chapter

Shawn Eddy
President, West Virginia Health Care Association

Sherri P. Ferrell
CEO, WV Primary Care Association

Suzanne Gharib, MD
President, West Virginia Rheumatology Society

Melissa Jensen, MSPA, PA-C and Megan Ross, MPH, CHES
Co-Chairs, WV Immunization Network

Jim Kaufman
President and CEO, West Virginia Hospital Association

Howard Lafferty, DO
President, West Virginia Academy of Family Physicians

Sharon L. Lansdale, RPh, MS
President/CEO, Center for Rural Health Development, Inc.

PS Martin, MD, FACEP, FAEMS
President, National Association of EMS Physicians West Virginia Chapter

Eleisha J. Nickoles, DDS
President, West Virginia Dental Association

L. Michael Peterson, DO, FACEP
President, West Virginia College of Emergency Physicians

Kara Piechowski, PharmD, BCPS, BC-ADM, CTTS
Director, Tobacco-Free Me WV

Michael Robie, DO
President, West Virginia Osteopathic Medical Association

Susan Russell, MSN, NE-BC, RN-BC
President, West Virginia Organization for Nursing Leadership

Gregory Schaefer, DO, FACS
President, WV Chapter of the American College of Surgeons

Angela D. Settle, DNP, APRN, BC, FNP
CEO, West Virginia Health Right, Inc.

Shafic A. Sraj, MD
President, West Virginia State Medical Association

Lauren W.M. Swager MD
Division Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
WVU Medicine, Department of Behavioral Medicine and Psychiatry

Matt Walker
Director, West Virginia Independent Pharmacy Association

West Virginia Affiliate of the American College of Nurse-Midwives

West Virginia Association of School Nurses

West Virginia Orthopaedic Society

West Virginia Pharmacists Association

West Virginia Section of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

West Virginia Society of Anesthesiologists

Joyce Wilson, MSN, APRN, FNP-C
President, West Virginia Nurses Association