

# A Message from Kevin Tabb, MD

## President and CEO, Beth Israel Lahey Health

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In my last video message to you earlier this summer, I noted that the intensity and burden of the pandemic was (thankfully) easing up. But if this pandemic has taught us anything, it's that the virus that causes COVID is sneaky - and it's relentless.

We now find ourselves at the edge of another surge in COVID cases with the growing threat of the Delta variant. During the month of July, the number of COVID-positive cases in Massachusetts doubled every one to two weeks - a ten-fold increase from 78 new cases a day at the beginning of the month to more than 700 new cases a day by the end of the month. We haven't seen anything like that since after Thanksgiving.

It's clear we're at another critical inflection point... a fork in the road. We can either prolong this pandemic by giving in and giving up to our exhaustion and our frustration.... Or, we can commit to doing everything we can to fight it.

We can't give in. And we can't give up. And our profound responsibility to our patients and to each other - our moral responsibility, really - must drive the actions we take as an organization.

So it's with that in mind that I'm announcing today three important steps we're taking as an organization to keep each other, our patients and our communities safe.

First, we're moving forward with requiring COVID and influenza vaccination for all staff. With about 85% of our staff already fully vaccinated, we had originally planned to wait until one or more of the COVID vaccines were lifted from Emergency Use Authorization and fully licensed by the FDA before requiring it as a condition of employment.

But things have changed over the last month or so. And, as we have time and again during this pandemic, we need to adjust our course as the facts and circumstances in front of us have changed. We're teetering on the edge of a significant surge in COVID cases, and we have safe and effective vaccines available. Millions more doses have been given in recent months, and we have even more reason to be confident that these vaccines are safe and effective.

To put the importance of vaccination in perspective, we now know that if you've been vaccinated you're 8 times less likely to be infected - 8 times less likely.

And if you're vaccinated and get a rare "break-through" infection, you're 25 times less likely to need hospitalization, get severely ill or die.

Given that and given that we anticipate that at least one vaccine will be fully licensed by the FDA soon, we will be requiring that – as a condition of employment – our staff be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, as well as influenza, by October 31st.

Thank you to the 85% of our clinicians and staff who've already been vaccinated and taken this important action to protect yourselves and others. The growing threat of the COVID-19 Delta variant is very real. Now, more than ever, we have a responsibility to ensure that our entire workforce is vaccinated, unless they have applied for and been granted a medical or religious exemption.

We're also reinstating our universal masking requirement – effective immediately. All clinicians and staff will need to wear a mask while on site except when eating or drinking in a designated space -- regardless of your vaccination status and whether you're patient-facing or not-patient facing and whether you're in a patient care area or in another area. I know we're all tired of masking, and we want to get back to a sense of normalcy. Our hope is that this universal masking policy will only be necessary for a short time, but it's a necessary line of defense at this critical stage.

Finally, we also need to delay the implementation of our previously announced Remote Work Policy, which was slated to go into effect on September 7th. Staff who are currently working remotely will continue to work remotely until at least mid-January of 2022. For more than a year, we've accomplished extraordinary things together – including with some members of our workforce working offsite. Given the significant challenges we're facing in this ongoing pandemic, it doesn't seem to be the right time to bring these colleagues, who have been working remotely with real success, back into the work environment.... By limiting the number of people in our clinical and administrative spaces, we can better protect each other and our patients – and preserve precious resources, including PPE.

Of course, we know many of you will have questions, and we've developed a set of informational material with more detailed information about these requirements.

These are significant decisions. And I want you to know that we didn't make them lightly. But I do think they're necessary if we want to live up to the profound responsibility we have to our patients and to each other.

Thank you for everything you do for our patients, who put their trust in us... for each other... and for the communities we serve. And for being part of our efforts to ensure there are brighter days ahead.

And I assure you there will be brighter days ahead.