



Legislative Building
Olympia, WA 98504-0482

Washington State Senate

Phone: (360) 786-7550
FAX: (360) 786-1999

Delivered Via Electronic Mail

February 1, 2022

The Honorable Jay Inslee
Governor
State of Washington
P.O. Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504

Dear Governor Inslee,

Over the past month we have seen the latest surge from the Omicron variant move through our state. Given that high transmissibility is the hallmark of this latest variant, we have also seen case rates rise to the highest levels during the pandemic. Likewise, our hospital system has been extremely strained by the dual threats of remaining Delta patients and new ones infected with Omicron presenting at our health care facilities and emergency rooms with either a positive test while asymptomatic or with mild symptoms.

Fortunately, we have not seen, nor are we projected to see, a corresponding rise in deaths from Omicron. During the first Senate Health & Long-Term Care Committee meeting on January 12, we received an extensive update on the COVID-19 landscape in our state from the Department of Health and infectious disease experts from Washington State University and the University of Washington.

During the briefing, Dr. Chris Murray, chair of Health Metrics Sciences at the University of Washington, presented modeling data from the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) whose modeling work you have admittedly relied upon throughout the pandemic. Dr. Murray's presentation highlighted several important data points:

- South Africa and U.K. data suggest that 80%-90% of Omicron infections may be asymptomatic compared to 40% for Delta.
- Hospitalization rate among diagnosed cases is 40%-60% lower with Omicron.
- Omicron death rate among those hospitalized is 80%-90% lower.
- The infection-fatality rate is 96%-99% lower for Omicron than Delta.

Dr. Murray's presentation further explained that new variants of the virus will continue emerging. Omicron is projected to infect 50% of the state, which will lead to population immunity. Perhaps the most enlightening part of the presentation to the Senate Health & Long-Term Care Committee was that **a best strategy is that we should now change our mindset to managing an endemic disease and move out of the pandemic mode we have been in for nearly two years.**

We are grateful that you have relied on science in following IHME's projections and data in addressing the pandemic in the past. We ask that you again rely on the science in the presentation we received from Dr. Murray and IHME. The prior strategies to address the pandemic are now outdated and obsolete as we move through the endemic stage of the virus.

In Pennsylvania, there is no state mask mandate for schools or businesses. Their governor lifted all COVID-19 mitigation measures even in the face of surges from Delta and Omicron. Pennsylvania businesses may implement mask policies at their discretion, but are under no mandate to do so. We urge you to lift masking and mitigation policies statewide to ease the burden on our schools and hospitality sector.

We also urge you to expend funds on our long-term care facilities to ease the backlog of patients waiting for discharge from our hospitals. These funds would free up critical beds to ease our strained hospital system. Our Medicaid reimbursement rates to long-term care facilities in Washington have been chronically low for years. Many long-term care facilities simply cannot afford to take Medicaid patients because the reimbursement is too low. We request that you raise these critical rates to long-term care facilities immediately to remove the discharge bottleneck out of our hospitals.

Furthermore, we ask that you shift the state's focus away from messaging on COVID-19 testing. On September 15, 2021, the Department of Health (DOH) stopped updating any testing metrics on its Coronavirus Dashboard. DOH does not expect to be able to resume posting testing metrics again until February 28, 2022. The testing volume has been so high that DOH cannot keep up with the test reporting. As such, we have no clear picture of what our testing is showing us or what percentage of tests are coming back positive. With the proliferation of at-home tests now, the confusion will only get worse. Again, Dr. Murray noted that up to 50% of the state will have been infected by the end of Omicron. Trying to test widely and wrangle those results together during the endemic phase of the virus is futile. In fact, Dr. Murray stated in his presentation that we should dramatically rethink our approach and no longer test asymptomatic people. Therefore, we should stop emphasizing testing as a viable option for measuring disease transmission especially for people without symptoms.

Cases in Western Washington are projected to decrease in the coming days. In South Africa, where the Omicron variant was first discovered in December, cases have already plummeted just as quickly as they spiked. We have seen the same trend play out already in New York City and other northeastern states who had Omicron surges before Washington.

Just as the Western Washington surge came a few weeks after surges in the Northeast, the surge in Eastern Washington is two to three weeks behind the Western Washington surge. As a result, we know that we still have a few tough weeks ahead. However, as Dr. Murray pointed out, it is time to stop treating the pandemic in the same fashion we have been and pivot to managing the disease in a different way.



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This virus will be with us in one form or another for the foreseeable future. But, as the IHME models suggest, with Omicron beginning to wane better days are ahead. We now have enhanced population immunity combined with less severe disease and stable, low death rates. This development requires us to treat managing the disease as endemic the same way we manage influenza season each year. The time has come for us to pivot to a new management style. We urge you to make this necessary change in your messaging and actions.

On March 23, 2020, you issued a stay home order as one of the first major response moves to fight the pandemic in Washington. By the two-year anniversary of that action on March 23 of this year, we request that you finalize the wind-down to transition Washington from the pandemic to the endemic phase of virus response. You can complete this transition by removing the statewide mask mandates, increasing the Medicaid reimbursement rates to our long-term care facilities to discharge more patients from hospitals, and de-emphasizing the current focus on testing. Please take these critical measures to fully transition Washington to managing an endemic disease and move us out of the pandemic mode.

Sincerely,

Senator Ann Rivers, LD 18

Senator John Braun, LD 20

Senator Shelly Short, LD 7

Senator Judy Warnick, LD 13

Senator Lynda Wilson, LD 17

Senator Keith Wagoner, LD 39

Senator Ron Muzzall, LD 10

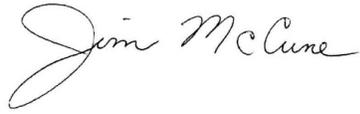
Senator Phil Fortunato, LD 31



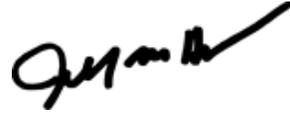
Senator Jeff Wilson, LD 19



Senator Jim Honeyford, LD 15



Senator Jim McCune, LD 2



Senator Jeff Holy, LD 6