



**The Hon. Renward Wells
Minister of Health**

COVID-19 Update Press Conference

**The Ministry of Health
Friday, 14th August, 2020**

Good Afternoon:

These are the latest national COVID-19 figures.

We can report that there have been 1,119 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in The Bahamas. 30 new confirmed cases were added today.

There are 138 recovered cases and 964 active cases, 31 of whom are hospitalized. As per our dashboard, there are –

- 570 confirmed cases in New Providence;
- 446 in Grand Bahama;
- 45 in Bimini;
- 31 in Abaco;
- 12 in the Berry Islands;
- 8 in Cat Island;
- 5 in Exuma;
- 1 in Eleuthera; and

- 1 in Inagua.

I am pleased to highlight some of our successes thus far. The number of recoveries from COVID-19 remained steady at 91 for weeks. This number has finally escalated to over 138 and counting. PHA has improved bed capacity at the Princess Margaret Hospital through the transfer of boarders to accommodations in line with their needs.

Breezes has been secured offsite for quarantining and treating suspected COVID-19 cases. This approach minimizes the potential spread of the virus among non-COVID-19 patients and staff within the Princess Margaret Hospital. Resources inclusive of security have also been enhanced at Breezes to treat patients under our care.

For the world, COVID-19 represents a myriad of challenges that severely impact personal and population health, health infrastructure, economic growth, and social development. The contingencies for our healthcare system, as other healthcare systems around the world, are being tested.

Bahamians have always responded well when our lives and livelihoods have been threatened. As a people, we have made many sacrifices. We have always banded together in difficult time and fought our challenges. We have used our ingenuity, working in teams to do amazing things. In the wake of devastating hurricanes, we have emerged #bahamasstrong.

In the same way, since The Bahamas saw its first cases of COVID-19, many healthcare workers volunteered their services on the frontline. They found themselves pressing through new thresholds and overcoming adversities they never thought they

would face. This time last year, none of us would have foreshadowed that we would be in this position today.

I am advised that for healthcare workers old enough to have practiced at the time, the current situation is reminiscent of the early 1980s when HIV/AIDS was first diagnosed in The Bahamas.

While the modes of transmission differ, COVID-19 requires the same all-in approach. This second wave of infection clarifies the point that the whole health team is required to participate in order to effectively manage this pandemic.

When compared to the first, this wave has greater numbers and hence more hospitalized patients. This state of affairs means that the number of healthcare workers who made themselves available during the first wave of the pandemic is no longer

sufficient to cover the larger volume of hospitalized patients that we say in this second wave.

A real concern is the growing exposure to COVID-19 amongst professionals and patients in healthcare facilities in The Bahamas. While the trend is consistent with COVID-19 spread worldwide in healthcare facilities, our human resource pool is not infinite – not vast.

Since many of these healthcare workers were exposed and are currently in quarantine, those remaining are at very high risk for burnout and teams are working short of members.

This was the reason for my Permanent Secretary's communication this week to all agencies within my Ministry. It applies to all workers within Health in accordance with Section 5 (2) of the Emergency Powers (COVID-19 Pandemic) (Lockdown) Order, 2020, dated 4th August 2020. This request

was tempered with an option of working remotely at home, especially, if co-morbidities are present with a medical certificate.

I wish to assure all healthcare workers that the Government is conscious of the fears expressed in respect of COVID-19. Hence, no efforts have been spared to ensure the safety of its employees through -

- training;
- increased and consistent stock of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to staff across all of our facilities throughout the country;
- increased sanitization frequency of the healthcare facilities; and
- rerouting of general hospital traffic to maintain distancing between non-COVID-19 patients and those suspected of being positive for COVID-19.

To date, there has been no furloughing, lay-offs, terminations or a reduction or deferring of benefits for any worker in the public sector. The Government has seen to it that PPE have even been extended to staff at Doctors Hospital West and to all public agencies of government to ensure safe delivery of services and that will continue as guided by the increased stock ledger.

I can also assure the public that the assessment, testing and investigation protocols for staff in the public health sector are being guided by the approved policy of the World Health Organization (WHO) and in line with the national policy under the Ministry of Health.

The health and safety of all patients and staff of the Ministry of Health, Department of Public Health, PHA, and our partners continue to be the priority. Protocols will continue to be implemented to minimize patient and staff exposure across institutions and agencies. This will, from time-to-time, result in

service and organizational changes, but the expected outcome of these measures will be for the benefit of all.

We have heard the concerns of the unions and associations with whom we have agreements. We will continue our meetings in the coming days to hear grievances; address the concerns of staff; and to find the best possible approach required for advancing the good of The Bahamian people and our teams across the healthcare sector.

Key to our appreciation of workers is the provision of a safe workplace. Employers and managers are encouraged to be careful how they treat their employees who may have tested positive for COVID-19. Keeping their confidentiality is a must. This would encourage an employee to open up regarding further challenges. This openness is needed to get our hands around this virus.

COVID-19 preventative measures apply to everyone on every island and cay throughout our archipelago. Everyone must do their part to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19.

One notable challenge in New Providence this week was the closure of Government offices and quasi Government agencies due to COVID-19. It is important to be aware that when a positive case is identified, if the person has -

- developed COVID-19 symptoms on the job; and
- worked in a facility for within a seven (7) day period,

the Ministry of Health and the Department of Environmental Health Services must be informed immediately.

The Department of Environmental Health Services will provide guidance on the cleaning of the affected area. Currently, I am consulting with my colleague Minister of the Environment

to determine whether modifications to the existing protocols for sanitisation of buildings/workplaces should be amended.

The Surveillance Unit of The Ministry of Health will conduct its contact tracing and risk assessment exercises. This process can be lengthy if it generates a widely cast net. The inevitability of COVID-19 being traced to a workplace as we have experienced this week and weeks prior is a reality.

Just as a plan of action is established in the event of a natural disaster, every workplace and household should have a plan of action prepared in the event a member acquires COVID-19. In households, it should be determined if it is feasible for a member of the family to quarantine or isolate in a room at home or if there is a need to relocate to an alternate facility.

If remaining at home, there should be

- one designated caregiver assigned to assist the quarantined individual;
- Supply of food and medication on hand;
- a thermometer handy;
- access to a telephone; and
- a bag packed with clothes, medications and other personal effects in the event that one needs to be relocated to a facility.

If you are *uncertain* of your risk of being a contact of a COVID-19 positive individual, be proactive:

- inform your family that there was exposure or potential exposure at your work;
- monitor yourself daily for symptoms;
- continue adhering to the preventative measures; and
- limit your movements inside and outside of your household.

If you are ***certain*** that you were in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, and you do not receive a call from Surveillance within 48 hours, please contact the unit yourself at:

- 502-7382 (9:00a.m. – 5:00p.m.);
- 376-9350 (8:00a.m. – 8:00p.m.) or;
- 376-9387 (8:00p.m. – 8:00a.m.).

These numbers replace the now defunct 511.

It is important for me to say that the South Beach Health Centre delivers COVID-19 care to patients with mild symptoms. Currently, the Centre is receiving some forty-five (45) to fifty-five (55) people daily who are referred from the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 hotline, community clinics, Princess Margaret Hospital or who are walk-in clients displaying mild symptoms.

This National Reference Laboratory (NRL) is utilizing the newly donated GeneXpert machine from PAHO and its Panther system for RT PCR testing. With receiving upwards of 800 samples in one week, the National Reference Lab staff has been challenged. Volunteers have presented themselves to assist with data entry and we are most grateful for their assistance.

Medical technologists from the private sector such as Premier Clinical Laboratory and Oak Tree Medical have offered combined processing assistance to bolster capacity to address the backlog of samples. All personnel at the National Reference Lab are working steadfastly through an astounding situation while maintaining a premium standard of operation and analysis.

Such comradery has resulted in the cross-fertilization of knowledge in diagnostic strategies utilized by other institutions. This positivity generated at the laboratory is similar to the

positivity generated by the Surveillance Contact Tracing Programme team at Melia Nassau Beach Hotel.

A team of health professionals have been working assiduously to obtain the data needed to furnish the National database of cases and contacts from COVID-19. With the work now progressing at a more up-to-date pace, a better assessment of the number of healthcare workers affected by COVID-19 and those in quarantine was obtained.

The Government of The Bahamas is striving to ensure that its citizens and residents move safely towards living and manoeuvring with the presence of this virus. Engaging in the recommended preventative measures should be a part of everyone's daily routine.

In the various workplaces, the physical and mental health of each employee should be preserved during and after this COVID-

19 pandemic. The Ministry of Health has posted on its website: www.bahamas.gov.bs/health, ‘Workplace Guidelines During COVID-19 (V9)’ and a COVID-19 Risk & Readiness Tool. These documents can assist employers with ensuring that their establishments are following COVID-19 protocols and have an environment that caters to the safety of its employees and customers.

This Monday, August 17, 2020, the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Bahamas Bureau of Standards and Quality will be hosting a virtual meeting to discuss national guidelines for a COVID-19 safe workplace. You are encouraged to participate. Meeting details can be viewed on the Ministry’s Facebook page.

In closing, I remind the Bahamian people again:

- wear a face mask when you leave home;
- maintain a physical distance of 6 feet from others;

- wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, and if soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 70% alcohol;
- cover your cough or sneeze in your inner elbow or with a tissue; and
- clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces such as phones, remote controls, counters, doorknobs, and keyboards.

Let us all continue to do our part to prevent the spread of this deadly virus COVID-19.

I pray God's blessing on you and may God continue to bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

Good Afternoon.