Health First is Here for Brevard

Our county, our country and our world is facing an unprecedented threat that is creating community concerns regarding the preparedness of Brevard County to respond to COVID-19. Speaking on behalf of Health First, we are prepared. We would like to take this opportunity to update the community on the preparations that have occurred in this consistently changing situation.

• Health First has 469 breathing devices, which includes single-use resuscitation devices and more than 200 ventilators that can be used if needed for patients with respiratory illnesses. We have ordered an additional 2,000 devices and expect delivery within the next few weeks. In addition, we have converted 66 regular hospital rooms to dedicated negative pressure rooms, which can be dedicated to treat those with respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19. These additional resources allow Health First to have more than 200 specialized beds to serve our community during this crisis.

• Health First has worked within our Medical Group and more than 220 physicians and is now offering virtual visits, and we are currently averaging more than 600 visits per day. A virtual visit allows a patient to speak with their physician regarding their health circumstances via phone or video chat. This technology allows the community to have access to needed care while following the national and state mandate to limit outings and exposure.
• Health First has ample Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at this time and is receiving supplies daily. This virus caught the world by surprise. However, we immediately began to order additional PPE as the virus began to spread. The need for PPE is dynamic and shifts daily as circumstances change, and that is why we are working with new sources for equipment to help our associates stay safe. Additionally, we are strongly recommending all associates who work in a clinical area wear a mask when performing their daily functions.

• Health First has installed triage tents at all four of our hospitals. These tents are used to triage those people who present with respiratory illness symptoms. Thus far, use of these tents is light, however, this option will keep potential COVID-19-positive patients from other patients who are not exhibiting such symptoms.

• Health First has ordered molecular lab technology from BioFire to allow us to complete COVID-19 testing at our hospitals. However, we were informed by BioFire on March 30 that the Department of Defense has purchased all testing materials and currently none is available for us to buy. BioFire has subsequently canceled our order. We will continue to monitor this situation closely, and as soon as we can obtain the testing materials, we will begin additional testing. We are currently pursuing other avenues for onsite COVID-19 testing.

• Health First has launched an online COVID-19 Symptom Checker, one of the first in Florida. This online tool allows the community the ability to access an electronic database and compare their symptoms with national data to determine if they should seek additional medical support. Easy to locate on the home page of HF.org, the community is encouraged to use this free tool if they feel they have COVID-19 symptoms.

• Health First is offering childcare services without charge for our Health First associates during this crisis. We are currently caring for more than 200 children daily. This service allows our healthcare associates to take care of Brevard while we take care of their little ones.

• Health First is assisting with the financial burden of having to see a physician during this time. Health First Health Plans members will have all copay and cost-share requirements for any virtual visit waived, as well as any medical cost associated with COVID-19. This will allow Health Plans members to have access to virtual care without any out-of-pocket costs or the need to enter a healthcare setting.

Across the nation, concerns have been raised regarding the availability of testing for COVID-19. Patients presenting to one of our four emergency departments with clinical indications who meet the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) and Florida Department of Health guidelines will be tested at the Health First hospital at which they arrived. If a patient does not meet the testing criteria provided by the CDC and Florida Department of Health, we do not test them. If a patient shows COVID-19 symptoms and does not require hospitalization, we do recommend they go home and quarantine themselves. This is to ensure we have enough testing supplies to help those in critical need and those who might need to be hospitalized. These testing guidelines are not unique to Brevard County. Everyone across the country is following these CDC standards. Health First is not permitted by the CDC and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) to diagnose someone with COVID-19 unless they have tested positive for it. We
currently have enough test kits on hand to use for patients who meet COVID-19 testing criteria, as stated above.

We understand the community’s desire to be tested, but the materials must be saved for the highest-risk people as directed by the CDC and Florida Department of Health. These are the criteria Health First strictly follows in determining who gets tested. As of March 30, 2.8% of Health First-tested patients have returned positive results for COVID-19, and there are 294 tests still pending. The national turnaround time, depending on the lab, is between nine and 14 days. Health First’s average turnaround time is approximately 10 days. On March 27, Abbott announced it has been approved by the FDA for a five-minute rapid COVID-19 test, and Health First is pursuing a contract with Abbott to receive these tests. Abbott is ramping up production to deliver 50,000 ID NOW COVID-19 tests per day, however, they are sending initial test kits to “hot spots,” which does not include Brevard.

There are three priorities of testing for patients who are suspected to have a COVID-19 infection – those who have a fever, cough and shortness of breath:

- **Priority 1:** Hospitalized patients and healthcare facility workers with symptoms.
- **Priority 2:** Patients in long-term care facilities with symptoms; patients 65 and older with symptoms; patients with underlying conditions with symptoms; first responders with symptoms.
- **Priority 3:** Critical infrastructure workers with symptoms; individuals who do not meet any of the above categories but have symptoms; healthcare facility workers and first responders; people with mild symptoms in communities that are experiencing high numbers of COVID-19 hospitalizations.

For more than eight decades, Brevard County has entrusted its local heroes to help them in their time of need. These selfless individuals have answered a sacred call and committed their lives to be there for others during the darkest of hours. Physicians, nurses and all who dedicate themselves to healthcare know it is their solemn responsibility to be the comforting hand and calm reassurance when the chaos of the world impacts our lives. Brevard should be confident that, together, we are prepared to win this fight. We will beat this, and we are united – because We are Brevard.