

Standing in Solidarity with our Medical Community and Calling for Leadership

Alaska has the highest rate of COVID-19 infections of any state in the U.S. Our healthcare providers are at their limit with long hours, grueling workload, and lack of resources. Rural facilities are trying to provide intensive care on-site because there is no room for them in Anchorage. With visitor restrictions, our providers hold the hands of the dying as they call children to say goodbye to a parent as they take their last labored breaths.

In light of this mounting crisis, on Saturday, the Department of Health and Social Services enacted crisis standards of care authorizing many hospitals to ration care when there are not enough resources. This means not everyone will receive the level of care they need, and not all will survive.

Add to the extreme physical and emotional toll the sorrowful fact that our providers also face unprecedented hostility from the public and those they are trying to save. Alaska's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Anne Zink, has reported that providers are suffering violence, threats, being followed, and even spat on. Our health care providers are living through trauma at work without the support they need from our community. Let's change that right now.

If our elected leaders won't provide the leadership and set the example of how we can mitigate this Covid crisis, then it's up to us as Alaskans to band together and do what we can to relieve the strain on the front lines. Besides showing our gratitude and respect, let's take personal action to stay healthy and keep others safe. Most of these cases could be avoided since most Covid hospitalizations and deaths occur with those who are unvaccinated. If you haven't already, please join the billions of people who are vaccinated. Stay home when you feel sick, avoid crowded indoor spaces, keep your circles small, social distance, and wear a mask in most indoor settings.

We believe in the saying that the best government is that which governs least. But the spirit of limited government does not mean we should live in a state that fails to govern at all or one that accepts poor outcomes just because the politics may be tough. This is exactly what we are experiencing today: a profound lack of leadership, with Governor Dunleavy failing to act in solidarity with our medical community and consistently making politically motivated public health decisions instead of following the advice of our healthcare experts.

It's past time to separate politics from policy. Had Governor Dunleavy shown early and consistent leadership in promoting the vaccine, wearing masks, and not criticizing those who do as "virtue signaling," not hosted and participated in likely super-spreader events, offered early vaccination incentives, not called yet another special session at the worst of the pandemic, and publicly supported our medical communities, we most likely would not be making national news for all the wrong reasons.

Most notably, Governor Dunleavy should have issued the 30-day disaster declaration in early September as urged by the Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association, which would have accelerated hiring hospital staff, made it easier to transfer patients, and expanded the use of telehealth. He said he had no intention of doing so, and since then, our Covid crisis has accelerated beyond our ability to handle it. Now out of desperation, the State is forced to authorize rationing of care and hire out-of-state medical professionals at exorbitant cost while people are dying every day. As a result, there will be many tears and empty chairs as our holiday season approaches. Nonetheless, our governor continues to present false narratives about Alaska's death and vaccination rates. The CDC reports that this past week, Alaska had the 20th highest seven-day per capita death rate in the country and ranks 34th of 50 states in vaccination rates.

We can also support our medical professionals by supporting our communities, schools, businesses, and other institutions that have vaccine and mask requirements. Not only are they trying to keep our kids in school and our economy open for business by keeping their employees and customers safe, but they are also easing the burden on our hospitals. We also stand in solidarity with all of those making the hard decisions to enact these requirements.

Let's remember the spirit that has always brought us together in times of crisis regardless of our myriad cultural and political differences. That spirit of unity and valuing one another is what we need right now, and it starts with gratitude to our heroic neighbors who are on the front lines fighting this deadly virus. It also begins with respect for the individuals and businesses doing their part to get this pandemic under control so Alaskans can get back to the business of living and thriving in this great state we are blessed to call 'home.'

Bill Walker served as the 11th Governor of Alaska from 2014-2018. He lives in Anchorage with his wife, Donna. He is a candidate for Governor in 2022.

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