March 16, 2020

Governor Christopher T. Sununu  
The State House  
107 North Main Street  
Concord, NH 03301

Dear Governor Sununu:

New Hampshire and the nation find itself in unprecedented times with the growing COVID-19 pandemic. Hospitals and health systems are on the front lines of responding to this crisis, working in partnership with local, state and federal officials to serve patients and communities across the state. We appreciate the many steps taken over the past several days to combat the spread of this virus and, like you, know that much more will need to be done in the days and weeks ahead. To that end, I wanted to share with you a number of critical steps hospitals and health systems are taking to respond to the challenge, as well as a number of issues that we will need your support and leadership to help address.

As you know, hospitals have prepared for the threat of an infectious disease outbreak for many years, and we have done so in partnership with state public health and emergency management personnel, as well as community partners, such as fire, police, EMS and many others. The relationships that we have built over the years are essential to meeting the needs of our patients and communities during this crisis today and into the future. Hospitals are taking a number of steps to prepare for this challenge:

- Ramping up preparedness efforts by instituting incident command centers at their local facilities;
- Limiting visitors and others to the hospital to help prevent the potential spread of the Coronavirus. Every institution is making these decisions with the best interests of their patients, staff and communities in mind. This will likely include closing public meeting spaces, cafeterias and other public gatherings usually held at the hospital. In addition, visitors will also be limited, with exceptions for certain patients, including those receiving end-of-life care, pediatrics, obstetrics, or when a visitor is essential for the patient’s emotional well-being and care. Other situations such as discharge planning and continuity of care that involves family or support of another caregiver should be evaluated carefully;
- Based on the recommendations of the US Surgeon General and recent guidance from the American College of Surgeons, hospitals in New Hampshire are moving to postpone or cancel non-urgent elective surgeries and procedures. These decisions are being made by
each hospital and health system in a manner that ensures patients who need urgent and emergent care are able to get the care they need, but to also preserve the personal protective equipment (PPE) and to create bed capacity for the potential surge in patients with COVID-19 who need inpatient level of care. As we know, the vast majority of patients who contract this virus will not need inpatient care and can be cared for at home. But for the 15-20 percent of patients who will need that level of care, our hospitals are preparing to be able to care for them. All of the social distancing efforts that are being implemented will play an important role in helping to “flatten the curve” of patients needing care, as well as spreading out the time in which they will need that care;

- Sample collection and testing continues to be a significant challenge in New Hampshire and across the country, as the capacity to conduct the sample collection and perform the tests has not been able to handle the demand required. While we are beginning to see signs of improvement, the health care system is scrambling to respond to this increased need. Hospitals are standing up a variety of mechanisms and locations to be able to conduct the swab samples for patients who have been identified by their doctor or health care provider to fit the criteria for testing, from locations outside or near the hospital to offsite clinics. The State’s mobile testing capability (MMRS) is absolutely essential to helping create more capacity to test patients for COVID-19, and we look forward to working with you as the State sets up additional sites across New Hampshire to enhance our State’s screening capacity, which will help keep hospital emergency departments open for those patients who are critically ill;

- We understand that New Hampshire is expecting additional personal protective equipment, or PPE, as a result of your request to the federal Strategic National Stockpile and we appreciate those efforts. As we mentioned when you met with the Rural Health Coalition last week, availability of PPE continues to be an ongoing challenge given worldwide production shortages as well as demand;

- Workforce challenges are growing and will only continue to do so as hospitals and health systems flex up their capacity to treat a potential surge of patients, as well as prepare for the potential for health care workers who are either exposed to the Coronavirus and must self-quarantine, who become infected with COVID-19 themselves, or who can’t work due to the closure of schools and lack of day care coverage options. Efforts to provide greater flexibility in licensing and other requirements will be necessary going forward. This is not a business as usual situation, and we appreciate your support and assistance in ensuring hospitals have the workforce needed to respond to this crisis.

New Hampshire’s hospitals are rising to the challenges of today and are on the front lines of delivering high quality care to the citizens of our State in this time of crisis. We must recognize the significant impact all of this will have on the financial health of New Hampshire’s hospitals and health system as they invest heavily in new capacity, access points, staffing and more at the same time they are canceling or postponing a large volume of elective procedures. This will have significant cash flow issues on hospitals and health systems, and we will continue to work closely with you and your Administration in the coming days and weeks to ensure they have the
resources and financial support to continue to serve the patients and communities who depend on them during this ongoing public health crisis.

New Hampshire’s hospitals and health systems stand at the ready to serve every patient in need, whether they are suffering a heart attack, in need of emergency surgery or need inpatient care due to COVID-19. I thank you for your leadership and pledge our continued partnership in addressing this seminal moment in the history of our State and nation.

Sincerely,

Steve Ahnen
President

Courtesy copies:
Lori Shibinette, RN, Commissioner, NH Department of Health and Human Services