



The world as we know it has changed over the past six weeks. It is these changes and how our community can come together in response to the global pandemic that compelled me to reach out to you and the community we serve. I encourage you to share this letter with your organization and community members as you see fit.

I am Damond Boatwright, Regional President of SSM Health in Wisconsin. I've been in Madison for six years now with my family and can honestly say I feel blessed to call this home. That said, I quickly recognized upon being here that we have too many marginalized and underserved members of our community not benefiting in similar ways as the majority. I truly still believe, though, that Wisconsin is stronger together than we are divided.

In my role, I lead our hospitals, clinics and post-acute care across Wisconsin. Because of this, I have been deeply involved in our current healthcare situation. Wisconsin now has more than 25,000 known positive cases of COVID-19. While we believe we have seen a peak in cases, as more testing is completed, and the state slowly begins to turn the dial towards open through the Badger Bounce Back plan, it is likely we will see additional spikes in these numbers.

A concerning trend shows that while COVID-19 does not discriminate in who becomes sick, our communities of color have been hit harder by this pandemic. The reasons for this are many, with no easy or quick solution. In some cases, the underlying conditions that put people at a higher risk for more severe cases or death are conditions that people of color are at higher risk of having, including diabetes, high blood pressure, and lung diseases like asthma. Additionally, people of color are more likely to hold essential jobs that put them at a higher risk of exposure, including jobs in the service industry, at grocery stores, and in caring for others through health and child care.

To respond to the evolving situation, the health care community has made significant changes to our operations to keep patients and families safe. We are temporarily prohibiting visitors at our hospitals, with individual exceptions for things like child birth or compassionate care visits at the end of life. We have re-scheduled and postponed all elective surgeries and procedures since mid-March. We are slowly beginning to resume some of this care on a case by case basis. Many appointments that do not require an in-person exam are now done virtually through telehealth video visits or electronic Virtual Visits patients can complete from home. Additionally, SSM Health launched a free virtual COVID-19 evaluation available to all Wisconsin residents, regardless of insurance status.

Just know this, SSM Health and my commitment to the communities we serve has not stopped. We continue to work with community partner organizations, like yours, to support their mission.

We have provided meals to a variety of partners through donations to local food pantries, fully cooked meal donations to local shelters and school food programs. We are continually

assessing our resources to find ways we can reach out beyond the four walls of our hospitals, clinics, and care centers to continue meeting the needs of our community.

Here's where I need your help. There are small, but meaningful ways every individual can contribute to getting Wisconsin back to a new normal:

- **Stay home.** Unless you are an essential worker or need to leave home for essential services like picking up groceries or medication, please continue to abide by the state's Safer at Home order. Data is showing that our choice to stay home and socially distance is working. The only way to continue flattening the curve is to continue staying home.

- **Stay connected.** We know this is hard. Our community thrives on social interactions and true community gathering. Make sure you're reaching out and utilizing the many resources our community groups are providing. Church services have gone virtual by streaming sermons online, organizations and community groups are hosting virtual support groups, conferences and more via video streaming services like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Tune in, speak up and connect with your community. If you're separated from your family or friends, reach out via text, call them on the phone or even set up a video chat or "virtual party."

- **Stay healthy.** It can seem overwhelming to take control of your health at any time, but now it's especially important. Do what you can to eat healthier foods, move your body, even if it's just walking around at home or taking a walk around the block a few times. If you're not feeling well, reach out to your regular health care provider. Many providers are now offering telehealth visits including video visits where appropriate. Otherwise, SSM Health offers Virtual Visits for \$25, regardless of insurance. These visits cover many common health complaints.

- **Care for each other.** If you are doing well, check in with your loved ones to make sure they are okay. Offer to help with grocery shopping for a neighbor, even if it's just helping them get set up for online ordering or taking their list to the store or dropping a few items off at their door. If you think someone is having a tough time, make a point to call, text or video chat with them so they know you care.

Since I arrived, I have always believed that our community could be stronger and better if we continue to care for each other. We can emerge from these uncertain times with deeper, trusting relationships that unify us all while honoring our differences.

Sincerely,

Damond Boatwright, FACHE
Regional President
SSM Health - Wisconsin

