

Omicron omnipresent at Obici

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Fueled by what's likely the omicron variant, Sentara Obici Hospital has been seeing its highest number of COVID-19 patients since the start of the pandemic, and its president says it will likely see even higher levels before the numbers decline.

Obici has 58 COVID-19 patients in the hospital as of Jan. 6, according to the Sentara Healthcare dashboard. The number of COVID-19 patients at Obici has been rising steadily since Dec. 25, when it had 18 patients, and its newly expanded emergency department has overflowed with people seeking treatment in the past week.

"I don't know what we would have done had we not had those rooms," said Sentara Obici Hospital President David Masterson. "We still had people in hallways and other setups, and surgical areas and cath areas after hours, bringing people at night into other areas because our volumes hit in the evening and at night in the emergency room. So as people are coming to the emergency room, say after physician office hours, that was our peak time.

"And a lot of our outpatient areas are closed for the

See COVID, 5

COVID: Hospital system postpones non-emergent surgeries and procedures

Continued from page 1

day. We don't have staffing, so we have to pull staffing in to put patients in other areas, but when you double in the volume that we did last week, we ran out of space in the emergency room, even the expanded emergency room."

Sentara Healthcare Chief Physician Executive Dr. Jordan Asher said in a Jan. 6 briefing that the fourth peak of the pandemic has been the highest and is causing an "undue strain" on its emergency departments.

"Our emergency rooms are busier than they ever have been in history," Asher said.

At Obici, it would normally see 120 to 125 patients per day in its emergency department, and its expansion was designed for volumes of fewer than 180 patients per day, Masterson said.

But between Christmas and New Year's Day, it peaked at 240 patients, though it was able to treat and release a large amount, "so that gives us an indication that what we're seeing is predominantly the omicron virus."

The CDC estimated earlier this week that more than 95% of new COVID-19 cases in the U.S. are the omicron variant.

"It's a huge strain," Masterson said. "When you double the emergency room volume, it's going to have a ripple effect on everything else in the hospital."

It hasn't been an ideal circumstance, but he said the staff has not compromised on the quality of care.

"I don't think we're doing anything unsafe," Masterson said. "But I do think at times when we're holding people in hallways for rooms to become available, it's not the most appropriate level of accommodation. The care, awesome, but it just puts more burden not only on the patient — visitation and limiting the visitation for family — but also the burden on the staff to be able to work outside of their normal zone."

Asher said it is a difficult time, but not just for the hospital system, but for everyone, calling for everyone to come together in the midst of unprecedented COVID-19 admission levels.

"This is effectively our fourth peak, and it is our highest peak," Asher said. "And it is a peak that is continuing to increase every day, at greater rates than we have seen before (and) our emergency rooms are busier than they ever have been in history."

Masterson said the hospital has an adequate supply of tests and will test people showing symptoms of COVID-19, but people cannot come in to be tested if they are asymptomatic. Asher said Sentara hospitals are seeing unprecedented levels of testing requests, as home antigen tests have been in short supply.

Dr. Laurie Forlano, deputy director of the Virginia Department of Health's office of epidemiology, said in a briefing earlier this week that it is just one of many test providers and said it does a minority of the testing, with the private sector, healthcare providers or pharmacies doing more of the testing. She said it has run into staffing issues at some of its testing

events.

She said people should be getting tested for COVID-19 if they are experiencing symptoms of the virus, and if they have come in close contact with someone with COVID-19. The state department of health recommends getting tested on day five after an exposure, but said getting tested on days three-to-five after being exposed is also acceptable. People should also be tested if their workplace has asked them to be tested.

But with hard-to-find tests — "the availability of rapid antigen testing might be strained for some time," Forlano said — "the state health department is also asking people to consider how critical it is to get a test and whether another option is available during a time when there is high community transmission of COVID-19.

She also said those who have tested positive for the virus and have recovered do not need to be tested as long as they do not show new symptoms.

And those with a known or suspected exposure to COVID-19 should quarantine at home and stay away from others, but that also depends on vaccination status.

Gov. Ralph Northam announced Jan. 6 that VDH would open nine new community testing centers paid for by an initial \$5 million and is seeking money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to reimburse the state, with one of those locations in Norfolk at Military Circle Mall.

The new testing centers are expected to provide more than 50,000 tests in January and will operate four to six days per week from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m., depending on location.

The urgency in people seeking tests comes as positive cases and hospitalizations have soared in the Western Tidewater region.

COVID-19 hospitalizations across the Sentara Healthcare system have more than doubled in the past 10 days and quadrupled in the past month, with the vast majority of cases, hospital officials say, coming via the omicron variant.

And more than one in two people are testing positive for COVID-19 at Obici, according to Masterson. Earlier in the pandemic, the hospital would see about 20% who would test positive.

"We've definitely seen a surge in the community," Masterson said.

As of Jan. 1, COVID-19 cases caused by the omicron variant have risen to nearly 94% in the regions the hospital system serves, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Contrary to reports of fewer hospitalizations, the Virginia Department of Health reported a record 33 for Suffolk Jan. 2, another 16 two days later and 11 Jan. 6.

The most recent 7-day positivity for Suffolk for PCR tests was 47.2% for the week ending Jan. 1, while the 7-day positivity rate statewide is up to 33.6% as of Jan. 6, and 40% for the Western Tidewater Health District localities of Suffolk, Franklin, Isle of Wight County and Southampton County.

However, Masterson said those who have been admitted, generally, are not experiencing as severe a case of COVID-19 as those who had symptoms of the delta and other variants.

The severity of cases depends, he said, on a person's level of vaccination. Those who are fully vaccinated with a booster or third dose are experiencing more mild symptoms than those who are either not fully vaccinated, or not vaccinated at all. They are also seeing cases in most age groups and demographics.

"There very clearly is a line of distinction between those who have had the vaccines, those who have had the vaccine with boosters and those who haven't been vaccinated at all," Masterson said.

The ones coming in before the past week had not been as sick as those who have been through the emergency department more recently.

"We have seen a rash of people coming in," Masterson said, "but up until this week, the acuity wasn't as high, so they weren't as sick with COVID as they had been in the past with previous surges."

Those who have been vaccinated and experiencing COVID-19 have had sinus issues, while unvaccinated people have had those issues exacerbated with fluid draining down into their chest, causing congestion.

"Last week, I would say omicron was not as acute," Masterson said, "although more virulent, as they would say, or more contagious. But this week, we're starting to see sicker people, and it might be because they've been hanging out with it for a week and just allowing themselves to get sick. On the other hand, it's very difficult to find a place that will test. And they're holding off, or are in denial that they have it. They're hoping that it's a common cold."

He also said a number of people they've seen in the emergency room are those who might otherwise have been helped in an urgent care facility or with better access to testing, and they're coming because they want to protect their family, friends and those around them.

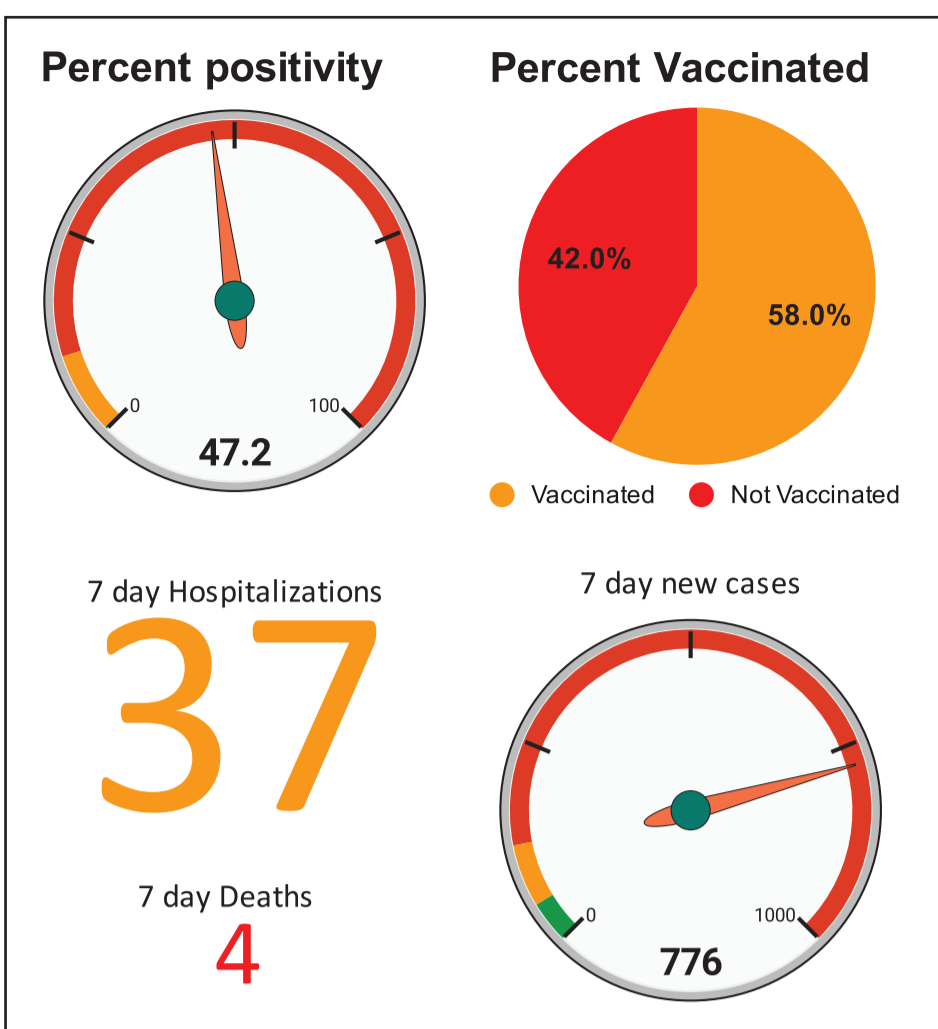
"They're sick, but they're worried they have COVID," Masterson said. "They're not sure whether they have COVID. They want to get ahead of it before they get more sick (and) if they could confirm through the local pharmacies through their testing that they were not COVID (positive), then they probably would not come to the emergency room. I think some of them are the worried sick who have legitimate illnesses but are not COVID, necessarily."

The hospital is also seeing some gastrointestinal symptoms — vomiting and diarrhea — that Masterson said it is trying to determine whether or not it is related to COVID-19.

What symptoms appear helps doctors know whether it's omicron or delta.

"If it's more of a sinus headache, drippy nose, sinuses, that leads to congestion in the chest, that seems to be more of an omicron signature," Masterson said.

Omicron variants



have been responsive to monoclonal antibodies and other treatments, but Masterson said they don't have access to all of the potential treatments as manufacturing of them ramps up. Asher said just one of the monoclonal antibodies — Sotrovimab — works for the omicron variant, and that is in short supply, with just 1,100 available in Virginia. Oral medications are also in short supply.

"Please don't think that it's OK if I get COVID because there are medications that will prevent me from getting very sick, ending up in the emergency room or the hospital," Asher said. "Right now I would not be thinking that way."

Statewide, the 7-day average number of cases through Jan. 6 is 14,547, with a state high of 19,506 cases Jan. 2. Statewide hospitalizations also reached a one-day state high of 556, with a 7-day average of 309.

Suffolk has experienced four of its highest positive COVID-19 case counts of the pandemic in the past week, including a high of 238 Jan. 6, 210 (Dec. 31), 208 (Jan. 2) and 205 (Jan. 4). The city has a 7-day average number of daily new cases reported of 197 and 196.6 cases per day per 100,000 population.

Masterson said patients have not been as sick, generally, but they're so infectious, even if the likelihood of infection is lower, the number of sick people is higher because of the sheer strength of the virus.

Sentara officials still urge people to get their COVID-19 vaccinations or booster, along with shots for the flu, which has re-emerged after being largely dormant last year.

While Masterson said they have the staff to care for patients, COVID-19 continues to impact them also, as some have been getting sick and are having to be quarantined, or they have had to care for family members who have COVID-19, impacting their staffing levels at a time when he said they're most needed.

Earlier this week, Obici also cut back on elective procedures, though it will still be treating emergency cases.

"Elective cases we are trying to postpone for two reasons," Masterson said. "Number one, the staffing that are involved with the surgical care can help us with patients that are in the emergency room or are admitted to the hospital, but it also takes a little pressure off the need for inpatient beds for surgeries that could other-

wise be postponed."

Masterson said it is anticipating the worst-case scenario of even higher numbers of people coming through the emergency department and having to be hospitalized, assuming that people who were exposed last week could become sicker this week.

The hospital is trying to set up processes and support systems to help doctors, nurses and respiratory therapists treat the people coming to Obici for care.

He said Obici's staff have been committed and caring, but they're growing weary. It has more staff than it has ever had, but it has also had more patients than it has ever had.

"They're working a lot of hours, and quite frankly, they're tired," Masterson said, "and I think they're also a little bit frustrated. And I've heard the conversation with the fact that a lot of the folks that we're seeing are unvaccinated. So I think that we just wish people would get the vaccines and let's put this behind us."

801 N. Main St.
Major SIGNS Inc.
757-539-6611
majorsigns.com

Artful Living
Lake Prince Woods
EveryAge Senior Living

An award-winning senior living community in Suffolk offering a continuum of services:
• Residential Living • Transitional Rehabilitation
• Memory Support • Home Health • Assisted Living

757-923-5500 | www.lakeprincewoods.org

Oh **SNOW!** It's going to blow

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Let's just chill about the snow already.

More will come, and it will leave the region with some

bone-chilling cold behind it, according to National Weather Service Wakefield meteorologist Roman Miller, but how much remains to be determined by a low-pressure system riding up the East Coast.

Temperatures will drop during the day Friday as the storm moves in, with rain coming before it shifts to snow Friday evening and continues snowing into early Saturday. By the time the storm moves

up the coast, temperatures in the region will drop and by Saturday evening will be as low as they have been all season.

How close the system gets to the coast will affect the amount of snow and the wind in Suffolk

and the Western Tidewater region, Miller said.

The closer the storm system is to the coast, the more snow and higher winds that will

See SNOW, 7

Snow: More winter weather on the way

Continued from page 1

come. If it passes by the southeast Virginia coast further offshore, snowfall totals will be lower and the winds will not be as strong.

Currently, there's a winter storm watch for the region and a 70% to 80% chance that the city will see at least 2 inches of snow, he said, with a forecast of between 4 and 6 inches.

"That's subject to change as the exact track of the low is going to play a huge role in how much

snow we're going to get," Miller said. "If it's further offshore, we'll get less snow. And if it's closer to the coast, there could be more snow."

Winds will be sustained at 15 to 25 mph, with gusts of between 30 to 35 mph, and up to 40 mph. Temperatures during the day Saturday are not expected to rise above freezing, and lows Saturday night and early Sunday morning are forecasted to be between 10 and 15 degrees. Sunday's

high is forecast to be 34 with a low of 20 Sunday night, and Monday, temperatures are expected to reach near 44.

"We're looking at a coastal storm that we expect to develop late Friday and then Friday night into Saturday as it moves up the coast, offshore," Miller said. "It will remain offshore at this time, but we think it will be at least close enough that it will be able to push over the area beginning Friday evening

and then continuing into Saturday."

It's unclear how long into Saturday the storm will linger. Miller said that depends on the track of the storm.

Miller said their different models are not handling this system particularly well.

"We're seeing large discrepancies between different models and even with each run," Miller said, "which is giving us lower than normal confidence."

Brewing more jobs

Massimo Zanetti announces \$29.1 M expansion of roasting plant

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Massimo Zanetti Beverage USA will invest \$29.1 million to consolidate and expand its roasting operations in Suffolk, creating 79 jobs.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin made the announcement Monday, saying it reinforces that Virginia, which beat out New Jersey for the project, is a prime location for international businesses. The Virginia Economic Development Partnership worked with the city, the Hampton Roads Alliance and

the Port of Virginia to help bring the project to the state.

The governor approved a \$450,000 grant from the Commonwealth's Opportunity Fund to assist the city with the project, and the company is eligible to receive benefits from the Port of Virginia's Economic and Infrastructure Development Zone Grant Program.

"Massimo Zanetti Beverage USA's continued expansion in Virginia speaks volumes about the business climate, infrastructure, and top-notch talent found in the City of Suffolk and the region," Youngkin said

in a statement. "Food and beverage processing is Virginia's second-largest manufacturing sector and one of our fastest-growing industries, thanks to investments by corporate partners like MZB-USA."

City and company officials, with Massimo Zanetti himself in attendance, cut the ribbon on a new 355,933-square-foot distribution center in Equus Capital Partners' Virginia Port Logistics Park off of U.S. Route 58 in March, four months after it opened.

See **JOBS**, 7



FILE PHOTO

Massimo Zanetti Beverage announced a \$29.1 million investment to consolidate and expand its operations in the city, creating 79 jobs.

Jobs: Facility to serve as East Coast distribution center

Continued from page 1

The facility serves as the Italian company's East Coast distribution center and e-commerce fulfillment site, and is touted as a strategic investment in its distribution operations for multiple coffee brands.

State Secretary of Commerce Caren Merrick praised the deal, saying the state is proud that the company's global brand continues its upward trajectory in the city and region.

The company's U.S. president and CEO, John Boyle, said the decision to invest further in its Suffolk facility "fits with our long-term strategic goals to continue to invest in Hampton Roads."

"Our proximity to major transit lanes and the Port of Virginia, one of the largest coffee ports in the country," Boyle said, "further enhances our position and allows for continued growth while adding to the economic vitality of the area."

The company had already invested \$17.5 million in the distribution center and another \$800,000 in equipment when it announced in June 2020 that it would build its facility.

"Our city's prospering food and beverage processing industry is highlighted by MZB-USA's continued support and job creation in the Suffolk community," said Mayor

Mike Duman.

Hampton Roads Alliance President and CEO Douglas Smith said with the company's corporate headquarters, roasting operations and distribution center all in the city, it serves as a cornerstone of the region's growing food and beverage industry. Its roasting operations and corporate headquarters are 10 miles away off Wilroy Road.

Virginia Port Authority CEO and Executive Director Stephen Edwards said the company's decision to expand in the city highlights the state's pro-business environment and the support jobs created by the port market.

"Our goal is to help Massimo Zanetti capitalize on our performance and grow its business," Edwards said.

Support for the company's job creation will come through the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program, a workforce initiative started by the state's economic development partnership, working with the Virginia Community College System and other higher education partners.

The program, launched in 2019, provides recruitment and training services fully customized to how it operates and comes at no cost to the business.