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September 29, 2021

Electronic Letter

RE: Providence Alaska Supports AO 2021-91 and Answers Anchorage Assembly Questions

Dear members of the Anchorage Assembly:

There were a few questions about Providence Alaska's overall COVID-19 policies during the Assembly meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 28. I hope this provides some additional clarity.

Providence has set the standard of modern health care in Alaska for more than 100 years. Today, we remain the state's largest health care and mental health care provider and with nearly 5,000 caregivers across the state, we are the state's largest private employer.

In 2020, Providence invested \$70 million back into the community by supporting education, local initiatives and partnerships, subsidized health services and more. Our work has included direct partnership with the municipality in the effort to make homelessness a rare, brief, and one-time occurrence. Providence is also one of the top 10 commercial property taxpayers in the Municipality of Anchorage<sup>1</sup>. We are deeply committed to improving the physical and economic health of our state.

### **COVID-19 and impacts on hospital capacity and workforce demands**

Alaskans can continue to expect high-quality care, but you should know that the state's health care safety net is strained. We are being tested like never before. Even before the pandemic, patients were coming to the hospital with more serious illnesses, requiring higher acuity care. These cases require skilled medical teams, including skilled nurses. Alaska's hospitals are consistently operating near or at capacity and available staffed beds are at a premium.

I believe the question was asked during the Assembly meeting and echoed by some in the room, if Alaska's hospitals and Providence are lying about the toll and impacts of COVID-19. The clear and unequivocal answer is no.

One only has to search local news stories during the past month to hear story after story from our nurses and physicians as they have struggled to continue providing compassionate

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<sup>1</sup> 2018 municipal commercial property tax data

care while facing increased demand and community need. I stand by our independent medical staff and caregivers and commend their courage and dedication, now more than ever.

Alaska now has the highest case per capita of any state at any time during the U.S. pandemic, by a factor of two. There are 176 daily new cases per 100,000 Alaskans; the next highest state is West Virginia with 90 daily new cases per 100,000. As our case rates continue to skyrocket, we have repeatedly had patients holding in the emergency department. This means that patients who need a higher level of care -- COVID and non-COVID patients -- are waiting in the emergency room before receiving an available bed. In the last month, we have had up to 30 patients waiting to be admitted into an inpatient setting, a record for Providence Alaska Medical Center. Like hospitals across the state and country, Providence has faced limited resources, including equipment, space, and staffing shortages. We have not been able to take transfers from other parts of the state. These limitations are directly tied to the recent surge of COVID patients, driven by the Delta variant.

Health care staffing shortages have only been exasperated by COVID-19 and are not tied to vaccine requirements. The lack of available travel nurses and the increased stress and demands placed on caregivers has resulted in real shortages across the nation. The mental and physical toll on health care workers will have lasting impacts. To be blunt, they are tired. They are burned out.

Health care is often a calling, and many are called to work in this field by a desire to help heal the sick or care for the vulnerable. As we have faced wave after wave of COVID-19, caregivers are retiring and leaving health care at record rates. Retirement rates at Providence Alaska are more than 19% higher than they were just a year ago. We have record job postings and are hiring at record levels. Yet we struggle to keep up with attrition, even while implementing targeted bonuses and other incentives. Our experience is not unique in Alaska and is occurring across the nation. At this point, the only way to reduce the strain on our caregivers is to reduce the spread of COVID in our community.

### **Elective procedures**

There is often confusion over the term elective procedures, as it implies that the procedure may be optional. Elective procedures are ones that can be scheduled in advance. This includes heart valve replacements, cancer surgeries, and more. There are real and dramatic consequences to delaying care and Providence does not take the decision to delay any health care lightly. That said, the ongoing strain on our resources has resulted in the postponement of elective procedures at Providence Alaska Medical Center throughout the pandemic. As Dr. Solana Walkinshaw testified on Tuesday, Providence has again postponed elective procedures that require ICU-level recovery through Oct. 4, with constant re-evaluation.

### **Providence Alaska's vaccine policy**

If we reflect to a little more than a year ago, Alaska's health care workers celebrated the arrival of the first COVID-19 vaccines by taking selfies and lining up to receive the first

doses. Our front-line caregivers felt relieved for the increased protection for themselves and their families as they care for our community. A vast majority of our caregivers are already in compliance with our vaccine policy. As of Sept. 29, 84% of Providence Alaska caregivers are either vaccinated or have an approved medical or religious exemption. This percentage increases every day.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services issued emergency regulations requiring both long-term care and acute health care facilities to vaccinate their staff as a condition of participating in both the Medicaid and Medicare programs. Roughly three-quarters, 75%, of Providence Alaska's payer mix is government payers.

In compliance with the CMS regulations, and in recognition of the critical role vaccines play in combating COVID-19, Providence Alaska is requiring caregivers to be fully vaccinated or submit an approved exemption request by Oct. 18. This policy resembles our overall immunization requirements. Medical exemptions may be granted to caregivers with a CDC-recognized contraindication to the COVID-19 vaccine or a condition that prevents them from safely receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. Religious exemptions may be granted to caregivers whose sincerely held religious beliefs preclude vaccination. Caregivers who are not compliant with the COVID-19 vaccination policy by Oct. 18 will be removed from the schedule and may be subject to termination.

Contrary to rumors being promulgated by some in the community, Providence Alaska has not yet experienced staff leaving due to the requirement nor has any disciplinary action been taken in anticipation of the vaccine deadline. We are focused on providing access to vaccines and education about the vaccine's safety and efficacy to ensure our caregivers are able to meet the compliance deadline. Our intention is to work with each caregiver to help maintain their employment. Most health care systems across the country have seen a 1-to-3 percent reduction in staff after instituting similar vaccine policies.

So where do we go from here? The good news is that public health measures that are based on science save lives. Masking is effective. Social distancing is effective. Washing our hands is effective. Vaccines are effective. Alaskans need to wear masks indoors and as CEO of Providence Alaska, I reiterate our support for any measures that result in the increased use of masks, including AO No. 2021-91. Mitigation measures -- including indoor masking requirements -- provide a layer of protection for our communities, families, and workforce. I thank the Anchorage Assembly for the continued dialogue about public health and for considering this important step. Let's come together as Alaskans and put politics aside.

I would like to conclude by reflecting on the positives in our community and on the strong support for health care workers. Most importantly, I want to recognize the outstanding strength and compassion of all Alaskan community health care workers who are on the frontlines of the pandemic, in more ways than one. I stand beside them and commend their courage.

Thank you for your service to Anchorage.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PMS', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Preston M. Simmons, DSc., FACHE  
Chief Executive, Providence Alaska

Cc: Mayor David Bronson  
Joe Gerace, director Anchorage Health Department  
Dr. Michael Savitt, chief medical officer, disease prevention and control, Anchorage  
Health Department