Dear Washington County community members,

As your local healthcare providers, with front row seats to the devastation that COVID-19 is wreaking on lives, we appeal to you directly; please take COVID-19 seriously and abide by the current health guidelines. We are at a critical point in this very real pandemic, which has already stretched our healthcare resources in St. George nearly to the breaking point. It doesn’t have to be this way, and we can still turn the tide.

The growth of COVID-19 cases in Utah is exponential and unsustainable. We are now averaging almost 1600 cases a day across the state and over 100 a day in Southwest Utah. These are not inflated case counts. They translate directly into increased hospitalizations, prolonged ICU stays, and very real deaths in a predictable fashion. Dixie Regional Medical Center has had to repurpose an existing unit to become a second ICU. Even with the increased number of ICU beds, skilled healthcare providers, especially those who care for the critically ill, are a limited resource. Forcing nurses, physicians and technicians to work ever longer overtime shifts is not sustainable. Retraining others to fill these roles impacts other care. If things continue to worsen, hospitals may have to allow some aspects of care to suffer, and if things really get bad to ration care. These decisions require consensus guidelines and the approval of government officials. You may have read that those conversations are already taking place. We hope that we never get to this point in Southern Utah, but we write this letter today, because if things don’t change, we fear we will.

COVID-19 is not just any old “cold virus.” Even with efforts to control the spread, it has already caused far more deaths across this country in a single year than any infectious disease since the 1918 “Great Influenza” pandemic. Hospitals and doctors, like ourselves, are not falsifying death certificates to inflate the numbers, or for any sort of financial gain. Over 235,000 people in the US have died from COVID-19 in 9 months. To put this in perspective, the highest estimated number of annual deaths from influenza (the flu) since 1986, was in 2017-2018 with 61,000 deaths. We are now seeing daily deaths from COVID-19 in Utah reaching into the double digits. Twenty-two of the 56 deaths in SW Utah have occurred in the month of October.

We have heard community members state that they are not concerned because COVID-19 “only affects the very elderly”. While it is true that older people are more likely to get severe disease, this is not universal. Twenty-five percent of all deaths have been among people under the age of 65. Here in Utah we have lost patients in their 20’s, 30’s, 40’s and 50’s to this virus, and many who recover continue to have long term symptoms. Additionally, an overcrowded hospital cannot optimally provide care for people who need emergency care for other reasons such as recreational accidents, heart attacks, and strokes. Failure to take personal action to reduce the spread of the disease will lead to unnecessary deaths due to COVID-19 as well as other causes.

Because there are now so many cases of COVID-19 in our community, the virus is spreading widely not only at large events but at small social gatherings such as birthday parties, family holidays, and social dinners. It then spreads in homes to family members who may be at higher risk. It is estimated that 60% of adults have at least one condition that may place them higher risk. The growing list of these conditions includes diabetes, moderate asthma, obesity and immune disorders.

While there is still much to be learned regarding how to treat COVID-19, a growing body of studies convincingly shows that masks, when worn properly (covering the mouth AND nose) work to decrease the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 infection. Masks work by keeping, the majority of an infected person’s respiratory droplets from traveling far enough away from them that others can breathe them in. Your mask protects me, and my masks protects you. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WT3zi7YczkY

The following simple measures taken by individuals across a population will reduce illness, save lives AND allow most businesses to remain open and providing services. We MUST all do the following:

1. Wear a mask in ALL indoor public places.
2. Wear a mask when within 6 feet of others, both indoors and outdoors.
3. Support and encourage customers, friends and family members to wear masks and physically distance in our presence. **Be an example.**

4. Limit social gatherings to 10 or less people.

5. Wash our hands frequently.

6. Get tested when we have symptoms.

7. Isolate and follow CDC guidelines when we have had an exposure.

This won’t last forever, but these measures are necessary at this moment in time.

We humbly plead with you to do these basic things to slow the spread of COVID-19 until better treatments become widely available, and a safe and effective vaccine is available to those who most need and want it. Failure to take these steps puts us at risk of another lockdown, something none of us want. Doing nothing to slow the spread of this disease really is not an option and will lead to a significant rise in unnecessary deaths and illness. This has nothing to do with restricting freedoms, but everything to do with temporarily sacrificing some of our own comforts to help keep more people alive, our community healthy and our economy strong. Please join us in this fight. We are not giving up, and we sincerely hope you aren’t either.

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Figure 1. The total number of COVID+ cases in Southwest Utah (blue line) and Washington County (yellow line) has increased significantly. The number of new cases continues to climb (red bars).