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## **Texas Freestanding ERs' Essential to Overwhelmed Healthcare System During Surge**

*More than 200 Facilities Hold Patients in Need of Hospital Beds*

AUSTIN, TX- Amid the worst wave of COVID-19 to date, Texas Freestanding ERs are proving an essential front-line resource for an overwhelmed healthcare system by holding and caring for patients for whom no hospital beds are available. Hospitals across the state are grappling with a lack of ICU bed availability, and Freestanding ERs are consequently taking in patients who would otherwise end up lining hospital hallways, waiting rooms and, in some cases, parking lots.

"For us, this is the worst surge since COVID has started," said Dr. Robert Velarde of Altus Baytown. "It's hectic. It's tiring. It's stressful. Due to a lack of hospital beds."

Freestanding ERs, like hospital ERs, are designed to triage, stabilize and when necessary, prepare patients for transfer to the Intensive Care Unit or surgery to receive additional care not provided in the emergency room.

"We're having to take care of not only emergency patients but also ICU-level patients," said Jeffrey Beers, a board-certified emergency room physician at a freestanding ER in Longview.

In recent weeks, however, staffing shortages have prevented some hospitals from being able to accept transfer patients from Freestanding ERs, despite transfer agreements between the facilities. In many cases, Freestanding ERs are holding patients for days while attempting to find a hospital that can care for them.

"We are the first line of defense, patients come to our emergency center when they require oxygen, or an ICU bed, we get them stabilized, and then we immediately start working on a transfer and typically that would take an hour or so," said Dr. Jeremy Gabrysch, Director of The Emergency Clinic in La Vernia Texas. "Now we're seeing that it takes days sometimes, where we're caring for these patients while our doctors and nurses are on the phone trying to get beds for these patients. In some cases, we're calling hospitals as far away as Laredo or Corpus Christi even, if the beds in San Antonio are not available, just trying to find an ICU bed for a patient we are caring for in our emergency room."

Holding patients in an ER who require intensive care or surgery for an extended period is highly unusual and risks poorer outcomes for patients. The State of Texas requires Freestanding ERs to report if they had to hold a patient longer than 23 hours. Many facilities have had staff members call more than 80

hospitals and often had to turn to google to look for a hospital bed for a patient. One facility even hired a staff member whose sole function was to track down any hospitals accepting transfers in order to find beds for patients.

Because of the high number of COVID-19-related hospitalizations, Texans suffering from common health emergencies, like strokes, heart attacks and injuries, are affected by the hospital bed shortage as well.

“If they happen to get anything else like a urinary tract infection that gets complicated or a kidney stone that needs a procedure, they can’t get a bed. They can’t get treatment,” Dr. Velarde of Altus Baytown said.

There are more than 200 freestanding ERs in Texas offering 1500 extra beds across the state. Without the life-saving care provided by these facilities throughout the state, the Texas healthcare system would lack an increasingly essential front-line resource during these extraordinarily demanding times. Thanks to the creation of the freestanding ER industry by the Texas Legislature in 2009, Texans in need have high quality emergency medical care with shorter wait times throughout the state. Freestanding ERs are serving their communities and alleviating the strain on Texas’ hospital system as patients with medical emergencies – whether COVID-related or not – turn to them in their time of need. Freestanding ER staff, like their peers in hospitals, are working back-to-back shifts and are serving patients at risk to their own health and lives.

“The men and women who have been risking themselves to serve their patients in Texas Freestanding ERs are healthcare heroes,” said Kevin Herrington, President of TAFEC. “During this surge, they not only have to care for patients but embark on lengthy searches to find them the next stage of care, whether ICU or surgery. They are making superhuman efforts to keep up with the demand for care and they’re meeting the challenge. We owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude.”

Even though there is a lack of hospital beds, Dr. Daniel Roe, Medical Director with VIK Complete Care said, “We are still finding alternative solutions to treat patients in the emergency room.”

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### **About TAFEC**

The [Texas Association of Freestanding Emergency Centers](#) (TAFEC) is a member-based association representing freestanding emergency centers in Texas. The Association works with state leaders to ensure the fair regulation and growth of this industry, as well as raising public awareness of the industry and promoting an overall understanding of the unique benefits of freestanding emergency centers.