Background

As a response to the current surge of COVID-19 cases and the resulting challenges to healthcare system capacity Governor Walz approved the convening of the North Star Future Operations group. This group has been tasked with exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the current surge, on the overall stability and durability of the health care system (including hospitals, clinics, long-term care facilities, and other care providers) in Minnesota. Following development of some broad research informed work to assess the current state, this group is engaging key stakeholders to work on identifying actionable solutions to respond to current and future challenges. This group includes representatives of multiple state agencies who are thinking strategically about solutions that can be implemented in a 12-18-month timeframe as well as identifying solutions that will require a more prolonged timeframe to be fully realized. Given the demands of doing this work in a pandemic environment, the North Star group is working with an aggressive timeline for consultation and creation of a situation analysis and proposed list of solutions, with the goal of completion of this phase of work in early 2022.

It is critical to note that the North Star group is not a decision making or implementation group. Our specific role is to provide recommendations to the Governor’s Office. Those recommendations will be based on the following criteria:

- Current state data on healthcare system capacity, labor market trends, and COVID-19 trends.
- Consultation with a broad but, due to the limits of time and capacity, not exhaustive list of relevant stakeholders who will:
  - Confirm, challenge and expand our understanding of the identified problems related to healthcare system stability;
  - Confirm or challenge our understandings of relevant state and federal statutes, regulations, and polices that influence how healthcare education is provided, how healthcare systems are funded, and what degrees of freedom to change exist;
  - Confirm, challenge and expand the viability of proposed solutions, with the guiding question of “If there was appropriate funding, support, and implementation, would this solution positively impact the stability of Minnesota’s healthcare system?”;
  - Identify potential disparate outcomes for highly impacted communities, including Minnesota’s tribal, BIPOC, and other underserved populations.
- Analysis of impact, feasibility, and timeliness of proposed strategies.

What We Know

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented strain on the healthcare system. The pandemic exacerbated existing labor shortages in the healthcare system while also driving extreme and unequal demand for health care services. Given the extended duration of the pandemic, the aging population of the state, and the projected slow labor force growth, the difficulty filling job vacancies is not likely to ease in the next decades. This situation will require a thoughtful, strategic, and coordinated response from the State of Minnesota, healthcare systems in the state, post-secondary education providers, and other stakeholders in order to bring stability and durability to the healthcare system. Measurable outcomes include manageable hospitalization rates and adequate healthcare staffing levels to ensure all Minnesotans have access to high quality health care.
We understand that there are the following economic, social, educational, and pandemic conditions that directly impact the ability to create solutions for the current challenges faced by the healthcare system and structures in Minnesota:

- This is a complex problem with no easy solutions. Many layers of interconnected, cross agency and public/private partnerships will be required to affect meaningful change. Many of the groups, personnel, and systems that will be part of any possible solutions are at or near max capacity due to current state conditions. There are likely to be few easy and/or inexpensive solutions.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has an unequal impact on the healthcare system. Some areas of the healthcare system are experiencing different demands, depending on factors including geography, populations served, and types of health care services provided.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unequal impact on certain communities in our state. Health Inequities have emerged, or been magnified, and require specific solutions.
- Bringing stability to the healthcare system requires solutions in several domains:
  - Increasing the number of new health care workers in both direct patient care roles (including CNA, nursing, allied health positions, and all levels of healthcare providers) and in ancillary roles within healthcare settings (including dining services, housekeeping, janitorial and facilities, skilled trades);
  - Increasing retention of current healthcare system workers;
  - Identifying changes or improvements needed in non-human capital areas, such as supply chain management and changes to current regulations to allow for needed flexibility to respond to emerging needs;
  - Continuing work to promote vaccinations and other emerging health practices to bring the pandemic to an end.
- Several current labor market and economic factors influence the ability to attract new workers and retain current healthcare workers, including:
  - There is significant competition for entry level employees in a variety of industries, which can make recruitment of new workers into entry level health care positions more challenging;
  - Pay levels for entry level health care workers can be challenging for workers who have dependent children, especially for those who may make just enough to be ineligible for existing child care subsidy and scholarship programs;
  - Increasing the pipeline of qualified health care workers can be challenging due to limitations related to high cost of healthcare education programs, availability of and competitive pay for qualified faculty, and availability of spaces for clinical/skills training and comprehensive simulation;
  - Current health care workers report high levels of burnout and stress due to the challenges of the extended duration of the pandemic.
- Many solutions will take more than 12-18 months to be fully realized, due to unchangeable conditions (e.g. creating a more robust pipeline of qualified LPNs/RNs/BSN/APRNs/Nurse Faculty requires time to ensure quality training and instruction to meet state and national standards).
- Before and during the pandemic, people of color and Indigenous communities are working in industries identified as "essential services or businesses" such as food processing, nursing
homes, supermarkets, and warehouses. Many of these workers earn low wages and may not have access to adequate health care or childcare, compounding existing disparities and harming communities.

**What We Don’t Know**

There are always unknown variables when looking at complex problems. For this work, that includes things such as:

- How long will both the current surge and the COVID-19 pandemic last?
- When/if there will be another surge and or new variants of concern. Related to this, are there ways to mitigate capacity issues related to surges while implementing short, medium, and long term solutions identified as a response to the current surge?
- If/when COVID transitions from pandemic to endemic, how will that impact demand on healthcare systems?
- What future demands will be on the healthcare system due to longer-term consequences of the pandemic?
- How many new healthcare workers will be needed due to current workers leaving jobs?
- What impact will the future state, national and global pandemic status have on access to all resources necessary to address the need?
- What future federal funds, policy changes, and interventions related to COVID-19 will be and how will they impact Minnesota?
- How treatment protocols and best practices for COVID-19 treatment may evolve over time and in response to new variants and new medical developments?