Statement from Mark Keroack, President & CEO, Baystate Health:

Since the first cases were reported from China last December, Baystate Health’s teams have been preparing first to screen and isolate patients. As we learned more about how the virus spreads, we have implemented policies around visitation and meetings. We have set up an incident command center under the leadership of Dr. Andrew Artenstein, who is joining me today. Andy is our Chief Physician Executive and also is an infectious disease physician and recognized expert on the spread of novel infectious agents. The incident command team is considering new information on a daily basis, adjusting policies as needed, dealing with issues brought forward by front line employees and anticipating the course of the epidemic here in Western Mass. We have organized information about the virus on our public web site (baystatehealth.org). There is also up to date information on government web sites, both coronavirus.gov and mass.gov. We are sending updates to our employees every weekday morning.

We continue to learn more and more about this infection, and it is now clear that someone infected by coronavirus can carry a large amount of virus in the nose and mouth, often well before they feel very sick. Because infectious individuals are so hard to detect, and because the entire population is not immune to this new virus, we expect that we will soon be dealing with a large number of patients with suspected or confirmed infection. Therefore, it is important for all of us to stay informed about how to protect ourselves and remain effective in our jobs so we can help our communities minimize this threat.

We know that the virus travels on airborne droplets when someone sneezes or coughs. It also can be spread when an infected person touches their face and then shakes hands. It may also be transmitted from frequently touched surfaces. Most people who get the infection will get only a mild illness, like a cold, but the elderly and frail are at increased risk of severe infection, requiring hospitalization or even critical care. Frequent handwashing, avoiding direct personal contact, and avoiding large crowds are at the center of how to protect yourself.

Baystate Health has developed screening protocols for our medical practices and emergency rooms that are the front doors of our health system. These are designed to keep people with mild illness at home and to protect our employees who are evaluating them. We also have developed an isolation unit at Baystate Medical Center where we plan to admit the initial confirmed cases. We will be continuously anticipating and likely expanding our capabilities to care for these patients as the epidemic unfolds. We also are paying close attention to public health measures being implemented at the state and national level. We support measures to eliminate events where crowds gather, such as parades and sporting events, and we
encourage all employees to think of ways to avoid large face to face meetings when possible.

No one knows for sure how extensive the coronavirus outbreak will be in Western Mass, but we know that countries that do not suspect the presence of the virus or do not prepare can become overwhelmed. We are determined to avoid that scenario here at Baystate Health. I am pleased with the extensive preparations that have gone on thus far, and with the energy and ingenuity of the team that has come together to combat this threat.

I appreciate that the emergence of a new infection can cause fear, and that unfounded theories about its spread and containment are all over the internet and social media sites. It is incumbent on Baystate Health, as the recognized leader and definitive health resource for Western Mass, to provide a measured and caring response that is consistent with our traditional values and our mission of advancing care and enhancing lives. We need to partner with everyone in the community to address this threat. If we stay informed, take proper precautions and help each other, I am confident we can diminish the impact of this threat.