

Press Briefing by White House COVID-19 Response Team and Public Health Officials

Via Teleconference

11:37 A.M. EDT

MR. ZIENTS: Good morning, and thanks for joining us. Before I turn to Drs. Walensky, Fauci, and Murthy I want to reinforce the importance of the six-part “Path Out of the Pandemic” action plan President Biden announced yesterday.

Stepping back, the more transmissible Delta variant is driving a surge in cases, and this remains a pandemic of the unvaccinated.

We know that vaccinations are the best way to beat this pandemic. That’s why, from day one, we’ve been working tirelessly to get shots in arms and we have made significant lifesaving progress.

Safe, effective, and free vaccines are readily available to everyone. Nearly 75 percent of eligible Americans — those 12 and older — have gotten at least their first shot. And now over 177 million Americans are fully vaccinated — that’s up from just 2 million when the President took office.

And the pace of vaccinations has picked up: 14 million people rolled up their sleeves and got their first shot in August — 4 million more than in the month of July.

Thanks to the success of our vaccination program and the resources provided by the American Rescue Plan, we are in a much stronger position than when the country experienced case surges in the past.

But we have more to do. The President’s action plan builds on the work we’ve been doing since day one of his presidency. It’s

aggressive, it's comprehensive, and it will drive additional progress this fall by getting more people vaccinated, keeping schools open and our economy growing, and decreasing hospitalizations and deaths.

Getting more people vaccinated is the cornerstone of this plan.

After President Biden announced vaccination requirements for federal workers in July, hundreds of small, medium, and large businesses; healthcare systems; colleges and universities; school districts; and state and local governments have stepped up to follow his lead and adopt requirements covering tens of millions of Americans.

Yesterday, the President dramatically expanded the reach of vaccination requirements, requiring — through a rule OSHA is developing — that all businesses with 100 or more employees ensure every worker is either fully vaccinated or gets tested at least one time a week; requiring all workers in most healthcare settings that receive Medicaid or Medicare to be fully vaccinated; requiring all federal executive branch employees and all employees of federal contractors to be fully vaccinated; and requiring all Head Start educators and teachers and staff of all federally run schools to be fully vaccinated.

So, from private sector employees, to healthcare workers, to educators and teachers, to federal employees and contractors, the President is covering over 100 million workers with vaccination requirements. A hundred million workers — that's two thirds of all workers in America.

And the President's vaccination requirements are becoming the standard for American workers across the country. Vaccination requirements have been around for decades for diseases like polio, smallpox, and measles. They're widely supported, and

importantly, they're proven to work.

We know that private and public sector institutions that have adopted vaccination requirements have seen significant increases in the vaccination rates in short order.

That's why, since the President addressed the nation last evening, you've seen a chorus of public and private sector institutions all come out in support of the President's plan.

The American Medical Association and the National Nurses Union endorsed what they called the President's "robust" plan.

The Business Roundtable, which represents more than 200 businesses that employ a total of 20 million workers, welcomed the President's announcements.

And the Republican Governor of Vermont, Phil Scott, also applauded the President's plan.

Vaccination requirements will help make employees, workplaces, and communities safer, and help accelerate our path out of the pandemic.

In addition to vaccinations, the President's plan calls for more testing. Testing allows us to quickly detect cases and prevent outbreaks. That's why, as we accelerate the pace of vaccination, the President's plan also ramps up the availability of testing across the country by using the Defense Production Act to accelerate the production of rapid tests; by investing \$2 billion to procure 280 million rapid point-of-care and at-home COVID tests; by expanding the reach of the free pharmacy testing program to 10,000 local pharmacies around the country; and by sending 25 million free at-home tests to 1,400 community health centers and hundreds of food banks.

Walmart, Amazon, and Kroger will also sell at-home testing kits

at cost for the next three months.

Together, these steps will ensure that every American, no matter their income level, will have easy access to convenient tests.

As we boost vaccinations and increase testing, we're also doing everything we can to keep kids safely in school.

Earlier this morning, the President, the First Lady, and Secretary Cardona visited a middle school here in Washington, D.C., to see firsthand the steps the school is taking to ensure kids are safe and in the classroom. They're doing what works, including vaccinations, masking, and testing.

We have provided all schools throughout the country over \$130 billion through the American Rescue Plan to implement these very strategies. There is simply no excuse for failing to do so. This isn't about politics; it's about protecting our kids.

And as the President has made very clear, we stand with the school district leaders, educators, and parents who are doing right by kids. And we'll take on those who are standing in the way.

Last, we continue to support states and improve care for those who get COVID.

Since July, our whole-of-government COVID-19 Surge Teams have worked to support 18 states as they battle Delta, deploying nearly 1,000 personnel including doctors, nurses, paramedics, and hundreds of critical supplies like ventilators and ambulances to support strained health systems, and, importantly, shipping over 1 million doses of lifesaving monoclonal antibody treatments.

Yesterday, the President announced additional actions, including doubling the number of military health teams deploying to

hospitals around the country and increasing the average weekly pace of shipments of the lifesaving monoclonal antibody treatments by another 50 percent in September.

I want to close with this: From day one, the President committed to the American people that he would marshal a wartime effort to lead us out of the pandemic. That's exactly what he's done.

The aggressive actions he outlined yesterday build on the progress we've made and will accelerate our path out of the pandemic.

With that, over to Dr. Walensky.

DR. WALENSKY: Thank you, Jeff. And good morning. Let's begin with an overview of the data.

Our seven-day average is about 136,000 cases per day. And our seven-day average of hospital admissions is about 11,750 per day. Our seven-day average of daily deaths continues at over 1,000 per day.

As the President said yesterday, we are working across the federal government and across the Department of Health and Human Services to turn the corner on this pandemic.

Today, I want to share with you the ways that CDC continues to be actively engaged in this work.

As you have heard me say before, we must do all we can to protect our children and to keep them safe, in school, for in-person learning.

We know what we need to do, and CDC has provided clear evidence-based guidance for schools to follow. This includes universal masking of students, teachers, staff, and visitors to schools, regardless of vaccination status; making sure that schools work to improve ventilation; implementing school

screening testing programs; and making sure that those who are eligible are vaccinated.

And we have resources and toolkits to implement these measures. CDC stands ready to provide technical assistance for schools and jurisdictions who request our help.

Over the past two weeks, I've shared with you data from CDC and our public health partners that demonstrate the important role of vaccination in protecting children. Communities with higher vaccination rates have lower reported emergency department visits and hospitalizations for children with COVID-19, even children who cannot be vaccinated themselves.

The President's actions to increase vaccinations among teachers and in the community, and to financially support schools in upgrading their protections, will help keep our children safe and our schools open.

CDC is also working hard with so many of you and so many of our partners to make sure that all eligible Americans are vaccinated.

We continue to study and report on vaccine effectiveness and vaccine safety. Today, we will publish a study in the MMWR that looks at COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths in 13 states and offers further evidence of the power of vaccination.

In this study, over 600,000 COVID-19 cases from April through mid-July were evaluated and linked to vaccination status.

Looking at cases over the past two months, when the Delta variant was the predominant variant circulating in this country, those who were unvaccinated were about four and a half times more likely to get COVID-19, over 10 times more likely to be hospitalized, and 11 times more likely to die from the disease.

As the President reiterated yesterday, and as we have shown study after study: Vaccination works. CDC will continue to do all we can do to increase vaccination rates across the country by working with local communities and trusted messengers, and providing vaccine confidence consults to make sure that people have the information they need to make an informed decision about vaccination

The bottom line is this: We have the scientific tools we need to turn the corner on this pandemic. Vaccination works and will protect us from the severe complications of COVID-19. It will protect our children and allow them to stay in school for safe in-person learning.

Thank you. I'll now turn things over to Dr. Fauci.

DR. FAUCI: Thank you very much, Dr. Walensky. I'd like to spend a couple of minutes talking about variants, which have recently been the subject of some discussion and concern.

This slide shows the selected SARS-CoV-2 variants with the lineage determination on the right — the B and the C — and the new WHO Greek letters on the left. We're going to focus for the next minute or so on the Delta variant.

Next slide.

As you can see from this slide, this variant has become extraordinary in its ability to dominate among the isolates in the United States and worldwide. Note that in June, just a few months ago, it comprised about 13 percent of the isolates, whereas now it is about 99 percent of the isolates. This becomes relevant when one thinks in terms of other variants that are becoming of interest to people.

Next slide.

I refer specifically to the Mu variant, the B.1.621 and the C.1.2, which is yet to get a Greek letter determination.

Very quickly — next slide — let's take a look at the Mu variant first. It was identified in December of 2020. It was detected first in South America, and it accounts for a large proportion of the isolates, for example, in Colombia. The reason it was brought to attention: it had a number of mutations that were of interest. But when you look at the effect of antibodies against these mutations, it is not a matter of alarm in that although it diminishes somewhat the protection, it falls well within the range of Delta and Beta. But importantly, only 0.5 percent of the isolates in the United States are Mu.

And if you look at the lower right, you can see how Delta, in blue, dominates over Alpha, in orange, and completely dominates over Mu, in green.

Next slide.

Again, the C.1.2 variant, first noted in South Africa, is not seen at all yet in the United States. And again, if you look in the lower right, the Delta dominates the Beta, which was the original variant that was in South Africa. And again, the C.1.2 variant is not seen in the United States.

Next slide.

So the bottom line of all of this: The prevalence of the Mu and the C.1.2 variant is extremely low in the United States — 0.5 percent for Mu, and nothing for the C.1.2 — because the Delta variant continues to dominate.

As always, we will continue to closely monitor these and other emerging variants. But the most important thing we can do to protect against any variant, be it Delta, Mu, or C.1.2, is to get

vaccinated, which has always been our predominant message.

I'll now hand it over to Dr. Murthy.

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Well, thank you so much, Dr. Fauci. As you've heard from all of us already, the Delta plan that the President announced yesterday is going to be pulling on every lever the federal government has to respond to the virus. And helping more people get vaccinated is one of the key strategies in this plan.

We've always known that in order to do that, we have to help people feel confident that getting vaccinated is the right choice for them and for their families. And when it comes to making important choices, we know that all of us often look to each other, to our family, to our doctors, to our neighbors, and friends, and work colleagues.

And that is why several months ago, we announced that we were building the COVID-19 Community Corps, which was intended to help mobilize trusted voices so people could get information from sources they traditionally rely on. This Community Corps will be more important than ever in the months ahead.

Now, since we started in the spring, the Community Corps has picked up a lot of momentum. Today, there are more than 15,000 members strong, representing over 6,000 organizations in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. They include doctors and nurses, teachers and ministers, friends and neighbors.

But in addition to the grassroots work they do in their communities, they've also come together from time to time on calls to hear the most up-to-date information about the COVID-19 vaccines, to learn about new developments in the

vacc- — in the COVID-19 response effort, and to also share best practices for their outreach.

Just this week, President Obama came to speak with the Corps and shared his appreciation for the community-organizing work that they're doing: knocking on doors, making phone calls, texting friends, and reaching out to folks in their community.

I want to share some of the ways that our COVID-19 Community Corps members have been helping people to get vaccinated.

First, we've seen extraordinary efforts in Native and rural communities, which are often located much farther from large hospitals and other healthcare providers. The nonprofit Partners in Health has engaged the Navajo Nation and other rural communities through mobile vans, phone calls, radio ads, and door-to-door canvassing.

In South Central Texas, Cuero Regional Hospital developed the campaign called "What's Your Why?" that helps people share their motivations for getting vaccinated.

And organizations in Kentucky — at the University of Kentucky and St. Clair Medical Center — have worked with local partners, from schools, to churches, small businesses to help people share encouraging messages about the vaccines across the Appalachia region. They've hired healthcare workers who connect folks not only to COVID-19 vaccines, but also to preventive screenings, resources to help manage chronic disease, and information about childhood immunizations, which many kids have fallen behind on during the pandemic.

These are just a few of many examples where the COVID-19 vaccine outreach effort has been a bridge to broader healthcare access.

The secondary I'd like to highlight is the work our Community Corps partners are doing with parents and youth, especially as kids go back to school. The organization Immunize Nevada recently hosted an all-day back-to-school vaccination event.

In Texas, the group VaxTogetherAustin has hosted more than a dozen free vaccine clinics this summer, many of them at local schools. One of their recent events called "Back-to-School Shots" vaccinated 225 people.

I want to emphasize that every single vaccination is a win; it's one more person protected against the Delta variant. And all of these conversations that our Community Corps members have been having, even those that don't end in vaccination, are essential to this effort.

We've learned also that you don't have to have a degree in medicine or public health to have these conversations. For example, one of our standout community leaders is 12-year-old Ayaan Moledina, who recently hopped on his bike and ventured out into the Texas heat to hand out flyers about COVID-19 vaccines. He said, "My bike broke down many times but I persisted and finished all my deliveries." We're so grateful for Ayaan and for everyone who has reached across boundaries of age, race, religion, and neighborhood to help people get vaccinated.

These stories are the direct result of an ongoing investment in the power of local, trusted voices to reach fellow Americans. It's a strategy that works. And I'm so grateful for all that Americans have done, all the doors they've knocked on, the phone numbers they've dialed, and ultimately the lives they've saved. It's going to be more important than ever that we continue these efforts as we work to defeat Delta and end this pandemic for

good.

Thanks for your time. And I'll pass it back to Jeff.

MR. ZIENTS: Well, thank you, Doctors. Let's open it up for a few questions.

MODERATOR: All right, first question — and please keep your questions very short, as we're limited on time — Brenda Goodman at WebMD.

Q Hi, I'm just wondering about the timeline for implementing the President's plan, especially the emergency rule at OSHA. How long is that expected to take, and how long will it be enforced? And then also, what is the ultimate goal of this new plan?

MR. ZIENTS: Well, I think in terms of the ultimate goal: It's to accelerate our path out of the pandemic; to get as many people that are not vaccinated, vaccinated, as soon as possible; to safely keep our schools open; our economy continuing its recovery; and to decrease the number of hospitalizations and deaths from COVID.

The Secretary of Labor will oversee the rulemaking process with OSHA. We anticipate that that'll come across the coming weeks and then will be implemented for, you know, all employers above 100 employees the need to get vaccinated or tested a minimum of once per week.

Next question.

MODERATOR: All right. Next question. Lauren Hirsch at the New York Times.

Q What is the punishment for companies that do not abide by the vax or test rule?

MR. ZIENTS: So this, again, applies to companies with greater than 100 employees. And if a workplace refuses to follow the standard, the OSHA fines can be quite significant. Enforcement actions can include fines up to \$13,600 per violation.

Next question.

MODERATOR: Monica Alba, NBC News.

Q Thank you so much, guys. The question is: Once boosters do become available in 10 days or so, for those who got Pfizer, as expected, what will be the standard for fully vaccinated? Will it be two doses or three doses for those federal workers and contractors, in particular, for whom the 75-day clock starts ticking as of yesterday?

MR. ZIENTS: Dr. Walensky?

DR. WALENSKY: Yeah. Thank you, Monica, for that question. We have posed and will pose that question to our Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. Currently, fully vaccinated is two doses of Pfizer or Moderna or a single dose of J&J. I anticipate, over time, that may be updated, but we will leave that to our advisors to give us some recommendations.

Next question.

MODERATOR: Let's go to Josh Wingrove at Bloomberg.

Q Hi there. Thank you very much. Can I just ask broadly — yesterday was focused on employees, essentially. Many of the deaths are still among the elderly, who, of course, have the highest vaccination rate but are still bearing the brunt. What, if anything, can you do or are you considering doing to try to fuel vaccinations among that sliver of older folks who haven't gotten the shot?

And separately, have you ruled out whether you would ever do a

vaccine requirement or testing requirement for domestic flights?

Or is that something that could still be possible in the future?

Thank you.

MR. ZIENTS: Dr. Murthy, do you want to start with the first question on the group that's 65 and older where vaccination rates are quite high, but obviously we want to drive them even higher?

Dr. Murthy.

DR. MURTHY: Yeah, that's right. Well, thanks, Josh, for the question. You know, it's important folks know that we've got over 90 percent of seniors with one dose of vaccine, more than 80 percent who've gotten fully vaccinated. That's good progress, but we want to get as close to 100 percent as possible.

You know, I do think to continue to extend the protection seniors have, that the boosters will likely be helpful in the end. That's one of the reasons we came together as a medical team from the Department of Health and Human Services and laid out that plan last week, which will be — last month — which will be contingent on FDA and CDC guidance.

But we're also continuing, through our Community Corps efforts, to reach out to seniors. You know, we know that every senior matters in terms of getting them vaccinated. That's a potential life saved. And so the vast network of community organizations, which include doctors and nurses, faith leaders, and other community organizations has been absolutely essential in doing that outreach, and we're going to continue to do that in the months ahead.

MR. ZIENTS: Josh —

DR. WALENSKY: Jeff, if I might just —

MR. ZIENTS: Please.

DR. WALENSKY: — if I might just add to that. The mandatory vaccination for our long-term care facilities, for our dialysis centers, for places where these elderly people often interact in our healthcare workforce, we've seen that that makes a difference. And so I anticipate that'll make a difference as well.

MR. ZIENTS: Thank you, Dr. Walensky. So, Josh, on the second part of your question, which I believe was about airlines: First, the vaccination requirements that the President laid out yesterday will affect about 100 million American workers. That's two thirds of all workers. So we're taking strong action on vaccination requirements, and we believe that workplaces are a very efficient and effective way to ensure that people get vaccinated or, at minimum, get tested one time per week. And verifying in the workplace that someone is vaccinated does not place an ongoing burden on vaccinated people.

As to travel, we're taking further action, as you know, to double the fines for noncompliance of masking on airlines. So that's a TSA action that was announced yesterday. And overall, I think we have a — you know, a very strong track record that shows we're pulling available levers to acquire vaccinations and we're not taking any measures off the table.

Why don't we do one more question? Kevin.

MODERATOR: Last question. Sasha Pezenik at ABC News.

Q Hey, guys. Thank you for taking my question. For Jeff: You know, as much as the COVID response has been in states' hands, I'm curious how you'll enforce the new mandates that President Biden has now put forth. We're seeing that so many

GOP governors already have pushed back.

And for Dr. Walensky, do you have an update on what percentage of people in the hospital are unvaccinated? Last we heard, your overall estimate was about 97 percent. If there's any update on what the new estimate might be, that would be very helpful. Thank you.

MR. ZIENTS: So, Dr. Walensky, do you want to do the second part?

DR. WALENSKY: Yeah. I will just say that that — this, of course, changes over time and by jurisdiction. You know, as we have more and more people vaccinated and with the Delta variant (inaudible) waning, we are seeing more people in the hospital with — who have been vaccinated.

But what I want to reiterate here is: It's still well over 90 percent of people who are in the hospital are unvaccinated. And as our MMWR states and I highlighted, we still have more than 10 times the number of people in the hospital who are unvaccinated compared to vaccinated.

MR. ZIENTS: Yeah.

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Jeff, can I add one broader point once you're done?

MR. ZIENTS: Please. No, please.

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Well, I just want to say, to the broader questions, you know, about seniors and kids and how do we protect them: The measures that the President announced yesterday, particularly with regard to workplaces, are really an important part of actually protecting seniors and kids, even though they may not be in the workplace in larger numbers. And here's why: Because we know that a key — that

the key to reducing transmission is getting more people vaccinated. And even if you're young and relatively healthy and you're not worried about the consequences to yourself, you could pass the virus on to other people.

And that's why this collective responsibility we have as a society to make sure we are not only taking care of our own health, but reducing the chances we pass a virus on to somebody who's more vulnerable — that's why this is so important. And that's what the efforts that the President announced yesterday will help us do: reduce transmission, protect lives, and protect our children as well.

MR. ZIENTS: I think it's a good transition to the last part of the question, which is — from day one, the President has been clear that COVID — the pandemic — is a public health issue, not a political issue, and that's how it's been addressed. And the President has been clear that he will not hesitate to take strong actions, like he did yesterday, to protect workers and the American people, and accelerate our path out of this pandemic.

We know that vaccination requirements work. We see significant increases in vaccination rates at companies, healthcare systems, universities that implement vaccine requirements.

When Tyson's Food announced to its employees that they would need to be vaccinated no later than November 1st, at that point, only 45 percent of the workforce at Tyson's was vaccinated. Now that number is over 72 percent, with many weeks to go.

At United Airlines, when they announced the vaccination requirement a few weeks ago, since then, more than half of its unvaccinated employees at United have now gotten vaccinated.

And they still have weeks to go before their deadline.

So vaccination requirements work, and that's why so many organizations have come out and supported the President's plan that he announced last evening — as I mentioned, the Business Roundtable, the American Medical Association. And importantly, local, on-the-ground public health officials have applauded the President's plan.

So, let me also remind you that it is — vaccination requirements are the current standard employed by so many corporations; that the President's actions will accelerate that number of companies across the board for employers over 100. And that includes Fox News, which already has that vaccination requirement in place to keep its own employees safe.

So, thank you for today's briefing, and we look forward to seeing you next week. Thank you.

12:06 P.M. EDT

To view the COVID Press Briefing slides,

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