
DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — LAUNCH OF VACCINATION WEEK IN THE AMERICAS APRIL 26, 2021

26 APRIL 2021

Hello, I am Carissa Etienne, Director of the Pan American Health Organization.

It is my pleasure to be speaking with you today, as we emphasize all of the ways that “Vaccines bring us closer” during both the 2021 Vaccination Week in the Americas and World Immunization Week.

This year’s Immunization Week arrives as the world embarks upon the largest vaccination campaign of our lifetime.

Thanks to the unprecedented collaboration of scientists and researchers from around the world, we have developed safe and effective vaccines against COVID-19 in record time.

Now, we all have the responsibility to make sure that these vaccines reach everyone who needs them— especially those who are most vulnerable.

And while the Americas have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries still cannot access the doses they need to keep populations safe.

At least 700 million people in our Region will need to be protected, and until they do, we will all remain at risk.

The current global system is hardwired for inequity – where regardless of public health needs, wealthy countries are favored over poorer ones. PAHO will stand with each country in our Region to address this gap and help governments immunize their entire populations.

At this point, limited vaccine supply is what stands between us and the goal of fully protecting our Region. We are doing all that we can to gather more doses for our region, both through the COVAX Facility and beyond.

Thankfully, decades of immunization successes have prepared the Region for this moment. The Americas Region has a longstanding and exemplary tradition as vaccine champions, having succeeded in eliminating polio, measles and rubella.

But while we know what it takes to bring vaccines to people across our Region, COVID-19 has caused significant disruptions to immunization programs in the countries of this Region.

Our health systems are stretched, and in many places, it has been difficult to access essential services, like vaccinations. Many people are also avoiding clinics and hospitals out of fear of contracting COVID-19 and getting sick.

Although many countries have acted quickly and provided services outside of traditional health care settings, hundreds of thousands of children have missed routine immunizations against diseases like measles, tetanus and whooping cough. And uncontrolled outbreaks of diseases like measles could stretch our health systems to their breaking points.

So, while we work to expand COVID-19 vaccine coverage across the Americas, we must also do everything we can to stop the spread of other vaccine-preventable diseases.

PAHO's Revolving Fund delivered more than 27 million doses of influenza vaccines to our region last year and millions more vaccines to protect children with routine immunizations. This year, we have delivered more than 4.2 million doses of COVID vaccines to 29 countries in our region – and we're just getting started.

We owe it to the heroic work of our health care providers, the extraordinary efforts of scientists, and millions of lives lost to this virus to get vaccinated and help protect others with safe and effective vaccines. This is a collective responsibility.

So do your part by getting a COVID-19 vaccine when it is your turn, and make sure that your children receive their childhood vaccinations too. I am humbled to be able to play my role in ending the pandemic, after waiting my turn to receive the vaccine.

Vaccines will bring us closer to the end of this devastating pandemic and lead us closer to the realization of our promise of health for all. I am optimistic that with time and determination, vaccines will bring us together again.

To celebrate this year's Vaccination Week in the Americas, please remember that the best way to protect our children and our Region is with vaccines. In closing, let us all then willingly embrace the theme of the 2021 VWA observance - *Vaccines Bring Us Closer*- for a healthier and safer future.

I thank you.