
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—18 AUGUST 2021

18 AUGUST 2021

Good morning and thank you for joining today's press briefing.

Over the last week, 1.4 million COVID-19 cases and nearly 20,000 deaths were reported in our region.

COVID infections are accelerating across North America, where routine surveillance has confirmed that the Delta variant has become the dominant strain based on the variant of concern sequences reported over the past month. The U.S. has seen cases increase by more than a third and Canada by more than half. In Mexico, more than two thirds of states have been deemed at "high" or "critical" risk as hospitals fill with COVID patients.

COVID cases and deaths are also on the rise in Central America, particularly in Costa Rica and Belize.

Meanwhile, most countries in South America are seeing a drop in new cases. Across Brazil, hospital occupancy is lower than 80% across all states for the first time since November, but transmission remains very active so now is not the time for complacency.

COVID infections and deaths are rapidly rising across the Caribbean. Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Cuba continue an increasing trend in both cases and deaths, while in Trinidad and Tobago, weekly deaths continued to rise. In Jamaica cases rose by 49% and deaths increased by 70%. We are seeing very steep rises in Dominica, Martinique and Guadeloupe.

The situation in Haiti is especially acute following this weekend's devastating earthquake. PAHO and the international community have activated teams in Haiti to support all aspects of the health response and we, PAHO, are fully committed to help Haiti during this very challenging time.

Sadly, among the earthquake's thousands of victims was Dr. Ousmane Touré, a dedicated PAHO epidemiologist supporting our response in Haiti. Our thoughts and condolences go out to his family and loved ones.

Dr. Touré's loss is emblematic of the dangers that health workers face and the extraordinary sacrifices they have made during this pandemic.

Unfortunately, tropical storms and heavy rains have added new challenges to Haiti's frontline health workers, complicating the ongoing search and rescue efforts and the delivery of supplies.

The situation in Haiti – and indeed across the region – underscores just how critical it is to bring this pandemic under control in the Americas, in the shortest time possible.

Yet across Latin America and the Caribbean, just one in five people have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and in some countries fewer than 5% of people have been fully vaccinated.

While PAHO is working actively to change this disparity, it will take months until our region has access to the vaccines it so desperately needs.

In the meantime, we must address the many consequences of this lasting crisis.

So, today, I want to take this session to acknowledge just how difficult COVID-19 has been for our mental health and wellbeing.

Throughout the pandemic, stress and fear have invaded our everyday lives and an unprecedented number of people have lost their jobs and are struggling to support their families.

More than 16 months since the virus arrived in our region, we have started to generate data that show the true breadth of COVID's impact on mental health in the Americas.

Let me tell you that the results are grim – demand for mental health and psychosocial support has never been higher, yet these services have never been more out of reach.

Three-fourths of participating countries report partial or complete disruptions in mental health services during the pandemic.

More than half of school-based mental health programs and more than three-fourths of out-of-school programs have been partially or entirely disrupted at a time when more than 15% of young people are experiencing depression.

And nearly 90% of participating countries report that mental health counselling and psychotherapy services have been disrupted, yet today up to 60% of people in our region are suffering from anxiety or depression.

These widespread disruptions have meant that many people who may be experiencing mental health challenges for the first time – including our frontline health workers, who have been operating in crisis mode for more than a year – lack the support they need to adequately manage their conditions.

And people already living with mental health disorders have struggled to access medications or essential therapies, which can worsen their conditions and leave them vulnerable to crisis.

Today we are facing a mental health crisis that, if left unaddressed, will have severe consequences. It will not only worsen the mental health burden in our region but also prolong the pandemic's impact.

While many countries have deemed mental health a priority and have integrated mental health support within their COVID-19 response plans, few have backed these promises with funding or have put these plans into action.

That is why we urge countries to please follow through on your promises by investing in mental health programs. A few countries are already doing this well and offer a model for our region to follow.

Chile has launched a mental health campaign with support from its president to strengthen psychosocial services during the pandemic, including by expanding the mental health workforce, offering mental health support to health workers, and building up community-level care to reach more people closer to home.

In a recent survey of health workers in 30 countries, 35% of these health workers said they needed psychological help, but only one third of them had received it.

Trinidad and Tobago has also reorganized mental health services to bring them directly into communities. It has launched helplines, telehealth services and online directories of mental health professionals to that ensure people can always access the mental health support that they need.

Costa Rica is also conducting multiple studies to better understand the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, to better inform their response and to serve as a reference for other countries in the region.

To support our Member States, PAHO has updated guidance to ensure health workers can meet patients' evolving needs amid ongoing COVID disruptions. And we are also working with countries to reduce stigma in our region because everyone who needs mental health support should feel comfortable and safe asking for help.

Mental health services are foundational to our COVID-19 response and ultimately to our recovery and rebuilding process.

Countries must invest in mental health now to weather the ongoing threat of the pandemic and limit its ripple effects for years to come.

This pandemic is a reminder that good mental health is a lynchpin for our region's health and the wellbeing of our societies.