
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—2 FEBRUARY 2022

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Thank you and good morning. Let me thank you for joining today's press briefing.

COVID infections and deaths in our region remain on the rise, and hospitalizations and ICU admissions have continued to increase in all subregions.

Last week, the Region of the Americas reported more than 7 million new COVID cases and more than 34,000 COVID-related deaths. However, the rise in infections seems to be slowing down in places hit earliest by the Omicron variant.

Most of the new cases were reported in North America, which saw more than 4 million new infections.

Surges continue across Central and South America, where Chile and Brazil posted record numbers of daily cases.

Deaths increased for the fourth consecutive week in all subregions, showing an increase of nearly 33% over the previous week. In the Caribbean, deaths have more than doubled in Cuba, the Bahamas, and Antigua and Barbuda. Other islands like Martinique and Guadeloupe, are seeing COVID spread rapidly among young and unvaccinated people.

These trends show that we must continue to sustain every part of our COVID response. Vaccinations, testing, and continuing public health measures like mask wearing and social distancing remain crucial.

Today I want to offer an update on one key component of our region's COVID response: vaccinations.

Thanks to the hard-fought efforts of countries throughout the Americas – and the generous support of donors like the United States, Canada and Spain that helped our region secure doses when supply was limited – 63% of people across Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Thanks to all of those that helped, our region has some of the highest COVID-19 vaccination coverage in the world.

However, the Americas are the most unequal region in the world. So, despite our progress, vaccination remains uneven in Latin America and the Caribbean. A worrisome sign is that today,

more than one in four people across the Americas have yet to receive a single dose of protection.

While 14 countries and territories have fully immunized 70% of their populations, the same number of countries have yet to protect 40% of their people.

And if we zoom in on low- and middle-income countries in our region, more than 54% of people have yet to receive a single COVID-19 vaccine.

We also have serious blind spots because we can't see detailed vaccination data.

We encourage countries to collect and report data showing vaccination coverage by age, sex and by risk group, where possible.

Without these numbers, we won't know what proportion of high-risk groups, like the elderly, pregnant women, or health workers, have been protected.

These data are crucial to designing targeted vaccination campaigns, maximizing the impact of vaccine doses and, of course, saving lives.

In countries that do report detailed data, we see worrisome gaps.

For example, in the United States and in Anguilla, vaccine coverage among the elderly is *lower* than in younger groups who are less at risk for severe COVID disease.

The good news is that vaccine supplies are expected to pick up this year. Donations from the United States, Spain, Canada, Germany, France and other countries total some 26 million doses. We register our thanks to all of those who have donated.

PAHO's Revolving Fund, which so far has delivered almost 100 million doses, is on track to obtain 200 million doses on behalf of our region this year, thanks to the Fund's agreements with vaccine manufacturers and support from other partners.

Due to the rapid scale up in purchases, donations, and COVAX deliveries at the end of 2021, progress was made on ensuring access to vaccine supplies, and countries will have enough stock to implement mass rollouts. So, countries will be able to offer vaccine doses to those who remain unprotected.

As these doses arrive, we urge countries to make the necessary preparations to make the most of these vaccines.

And that starts with collecting and reporting stratified vaccine data.

We urge countries to re-analyze their vaccination data to better understand their gaps – whether that's in geography, age, sex or among key priority groups.

If countries are already collecting these data, we urge them to share it with PAHO; and if they're not, PAHO is here to support them.

We urge countries to prioritize high-risk groups.

Countries should refocus their efforts in protecting health workers, immunocompromised individuals and the elderly, *first*.

If they don't, they will continue to experience outbreaks, their hospitals will remain overstretched, limiting care for other conditions, and too many people will continue to die from this virus.

Once countries have secured high coverage with primary series and booster doses among these highest priority groups, PAHO recommends that they retool the vaccine rollout plans to focus on the next highest risk groups.

As coverage in these priority groups grows, we will see reductions in the national hospitalization and mortality rates. It is at this moment that vaccine doses should be made available to healthy adults, as well as adolescents and children aged 12 or older who may be living with pre-existing medical conditions, so we can further reduce transmission rates.

Healthy children and adolescents should be the last to receive COVID-19 vaccine doses since they are at the lowest risk for severe disease. But we remind countries that the best way to protect the wellbeing of our children is to safely reopen schools. Childhood vaccination is not a prerequisite for safe school reopening.

And finally, this is also the time for countries to invest in their vaccination programs.

We urge countries to bolster their cold chain capacity to absorb incoming supplies.

Countries should hire and train enough health workers to deliver COVID vaccines without sacrificing staff for other essential services.

And countries should have plans to reach those living in hard-to-reach areas both in rural zones and in parts of cities, because they are too often the last to receive care.

Many places – especially in the Caribbean – also lack robust vaccination programs for adults, so it has been challenging to ensure high coverage among adult populations.

Now is the time to strengthen vaccination campaigns, organize vaccination drives and empower key groups like health workers and religious leaders to become vaccine advocates.

Reaching high vaccination coverage depends on all of us.

So, I want to send a special message to the millions of adults in the Caribbean who have yet to receive their COVID vaccines:

Let me share a little about myself - I am a medical doctor, wife, mother and grandmother. And let me tell you that I could not wait to get my vaccination, I was so anxious for the wellbeing of myself and my 95-year-old mother who lives with me. I can't begin to tell you the relief I felt when I, my mother, my husband, and my children were vaccinated, and that is because I trust in science and appreciate life.

So, please don't delay, get vaccinated today.

COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective, and they are the best way to protect ourselves, our families, and our communities from this virus.

We cannot get back the time that we've lost to this pandemic, but we can control how the future will go.

Returning to family traditions, cultural celebrations and the moments that make life precious requires that we get vaccinated.

Vaccines work, they are safe, and they can help us end this pandemic. So please, go get your vaccines today or as soon as you can.

Thank you