FINAL REPORT
VACCINATION WEEK IN THE AMERICAS

Vaccination Week in the Americas 2020

LOVE. TRUST. PROTECT.
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In the global epidemiological context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the message from the Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Dr. Carissa F. Etienne, for Vaccination Week in the Americas 2020 focused on encouraging countries to continue to vaccinate their populations against vaccine-preventable diseases, such as influenza, measles and polio, to avoid outbreaks of these diseases and "the impact on our health systems, which would take months or even years to reverse".1

"LET US CONTINUE TO TRUST IN THE LIFE SAVING ABILITY OF VACCINES SO THAT THE PEOPLE WE LOVE DO NOT HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT THE RISKS FROM MEASLES, FLU, CERVICAL CANCER AND OTHER DISEASES" – Dr. Carissa F. Etienne, Director, Pan American Health Organization

Her message also focused on promoting vaccination of populations most at risk - such as health care workers, older adults, and people with chronic diseases - against seasonal influenza in the Southern Hemisphere to keep them healthy and avoid overwhelming health systems while they focus on responding to COVID-19. The Director also highlighted the importance of vaccination programs in health systems, which provide children with "a healthy start in life and keep our societies safe from diseases that once affected millions of people."2

The Director also stressed the importance of continuing to vaccinate populations, as this will help the Region, which had so far demonstrated its readiness to administer COVID-19 vaccines when they become available.

SUMMARY

- From 25 April to 2 May 2020 the Region of the Americas celebrated its 18th Vaccination Week in the Americas (VWA) campaign and its 9th World Immunization Week.
- The 2020 regional slogan was "Love. Trust. Protect. #GetVax".
- In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, PAHO emphasized that VWA is a flexible platform and the activities developed under its framework can be adapted to the different local, national, regional and global contexts.
- 45 countries and territories of the Americas planned to participate in VWA. However, many countries postponed their activities due to the global epidemiological situation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown policies implemented in the countries.
- 16 countries used VWA as a platform to vaccinate their population against flu, prioritizing health care workers, older adults and people with chronic illness. They reached more than 100 million people in the Region.
- 10 countries vaccinated more than 250,000 children and adults against measles to protect the elimination goal.
- 9 countries carried out activities to protect the polio eradication achievement as part of VWA 2020, and 8 countries planned to use VWA to vaccinate teenagers against the Human papilloma virus (HPV).
- At least 10 countries used social media (like Twitter and Facebook) as an alternative to mass in-person events to promote the importance of vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic and to encourage people to continue getting vaccinated.
- Since 2003, 908 million people of all ages have been vaccinated under the VWA umbrella.
BACKGROUND

WHAT IS VACCINATION WEEK IN THE AMERICAS?

Vaccination Week in the Americas (VWA) is a regional initiative that aims to promote equity and access to vaccination in all countries in the Region of the Americas.

The participation of the countries of the Americas in the VWA is flexible. The VWA platform can be adapted to national, regional, and global contexts to select activities that best meet local public health priorities. At the heart of this initiative are countries' relentless efforts to reach vulnerable population groups with little or no access to regular health services, such as those living in urban peripheries, rural or border areas, and indigenous communities, with vaccination.

With these efforts, VWA has contributed to strengthening national immunization programs in the countries of the Region. The initiative has also provided a substantial platform for promoting the importance of vaccination, keeping the issue at the top of the political agenda, and continuing to attract media attention. VWA has become a shining example of what can happen when countries come together, across borders, cultures, and languages, with the goal of improving the health of their populations.

The overarching objectives of Vaccination Week are:

- Promote equity and access to immunization
- Promote the transition from child to family immunization
- Maintain immunization on the political agenda
- Increase vaccination coverage of all antigens
- Serve as a platform for integrated activities

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VACCINATION WEEK IN THE AMERICAS’ ORIGINS

In response to the 2002 measles outbreak along the Venezuelan-Colombian border, Andean health ministers proposed the idea of a coordinated international vaccination campaign to prevent the further spread of the disease. With support from PAHO, this proposal evolved over the succeeding months into the effort now known as Vaccination Week in the Americas (VWA).

VWA was first celebrated in April 2003 with 19 countries and territories participating. Later that year the initiative was endorsed through a resolution during PAHO’s 44th Directing Council. Today, the initiative has matured into a hemispheric celebration of the power of vaccination and serves as a key annual opportunity for all countries of the Americas to highlight the essential work of their national immunization programs.

VACCINATION WEEK IN THE AMERICAS 2020: ADAPTING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March, 2020; it was the first non-influenza pandemic affecting more than 200 countries with more than 40 million cases as of October 2020. Approximately half of the cases have been reported in the Region of the Americas. In many countries in the Region, the declaration of the pandemic, as well as the physical containment and distancing measures that were imposed, coincided with the celebration of VWA.

Consequently, this international epidemiological situation affected the development of VWA and forced countries to think of different strategies to be able to carry out their activities and adjust them to their national and local contexts. Thus, in addition to adhering to the general objectives of VWA, the importance of using this platform to integrate educational activities such as handwashing and physical distancing (measures in response to the pandemic) were promoted directly with countries and in the media. In addition, it was recommended that vaccination

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3Pan American Health Organization. Sustaining immunization programs - elimination of rubella and congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) [Internet]. PAHO’s 44th Directing Council, 55th Session of the Regional Committee for the Americas; 22-26 September 2003; Washington (DC): OPS; 2012 (resolution CD44.R1). Available at: https://www.paho.org/English/gov/cd/cd44-r1-e.pdf


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services not be disrupted so as to prevent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.

To achieve this task, PAHO considered it necessary to communicate to its countries specific recommendations to adapt the planning and implementation of their campaigns. These recommendations included the following:

- Ensure that planned activities for the 2020 VWA followed the recommendations of the national COVID-19 response plan, e.g., implementation of physical distancing measures.
- Cancel mass events, parades and fairs, etc., and spread messages about the importance of vaccination throughout the week through virtual media such as social media, television and radio.
- Emphasize the strengthening of institutional vaccination, adapting logistical and operational aspects to avoid crowds in hospitals and health centers.
- Consider and adapt measures for the protection of health personnel and for the vaccination of people in their communities, in hospitals and health centers, accordingly.

Faced with this global situation, several countries in the Region decided to postpone VWA activities in order to allocate all their resources to the COVID-19 response.

GREATER EMPHASIS ON HEALTH CARE WORKERS AND REORGANIZING VACCINATION SERVICES

One of PAHO’s strongest calls to countries and territories during VWA was to ensure the protection of health workers in communities during vaccination through safety measures against coronavirus, in addition to ensuring vaccination of this group against influenza and any other disease that could be prevented.

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Similarly, PAHO presented recommendations so that countries could adopt concrete measures to ensure the continuity of vaccination services and the protection of health personnel. The measures aimed at services focused on the following aspects:

- Reorganize vaccination services to be administered outdoors or in well-ventilated spaces.
- Keep vaccination services separate from other services in order to keep sick people away from people without symptoms.
- Frequently disinfect the spaces dedicated to administering the vaccination.
- Arrange for units with hand disinfectant or hand washing stations with chlorinated water at the entrance.
- Establish exclusive vaccination sessions or schedules for vulnerable groups (older adults, pregnant women and people with pre-existing conditions).

PAHO also recommended that vaccinators take some measures to protect themselves and their patients during vaccination:

- Practice correct and frequent hand hygiene.
- Comply with approved standards (wear uniforms only in the workplace, do not wear accessories such as earrings or watches and always wear closed shoes).
- Clean your cellphone properly and do not use it during contact with patients.
- Don’t touch nose, eyes or mouth.
- Isolate yourself and contact a doctor if you have symptoms of COVID-19.
The 2020 VWA was different from other years because the launch activities could not be carried out in the same way, including that the mass events that are so characteristic of this regional initiative could not be held. However, PAHO organized a discussion forum within the framework of the VWA celebration to present and discuss the recommendations that were developed to provide continuity to the immunization programs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The discussion forum was attended by the heads of the national immunization programs, epidemiological and laboratory surveillance of vaccine-preventable diseases; members of PAHO’s Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on vaccine-preventable diseases, and members of the National Immunizations Technical Advisory Groups (NITAG). Other partners also participated, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Gavi Alliance, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the United Nations Foundation, the Sabin Vaccine Institute, and other entities and agencies in the immunization field.

This activity represented a great opportunity to reinforce the importance of vaccines as a critical life-saving tool and of immunization programs as an essential health service that must be preserved during the pandemic. It also provided a moment of reflection to recognize that although VWA was celebrated during the pandemic, it is important to maintain vaccination campaigns to prevent VPD outbreaks.
In order to protect the most vulnerable populations, such as older adults, nursing home residents, people with chronic illness and essential workers, PAHO recommended that countries prioritize flu vaccination to avoid coinfections and overwhelm health services dedicated to the COVID-19 response.

In order to avoid overcrowding of these groups in health facilities and reduce the risk of coming into contact with sick people, PAHO also recommended that countries implement alternative strategies, such as establishing special and extended vaccination schedules, giving prior appointments, and installing vaccination booths in places other than health services (for example, in empty schools), among other measures.

Sixteen countries in the Region used VWA to develop innovative vaccination strategies such as staggered appointments or with specific schedules; vaccination in churches and banks; drive-through vaccination; and vaccination in nursing homes, in empty religious buildings and in outdoor posts outside health centers.

During VWA and other campaigns that lasted until mid-year, countries vaccinated over 100 million people in the Region, focusing particularly in priority groups: older adults, health care and essential, pregnant women, people with pre-existing conditions and children under 5.
COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN

The regional slogan for the 2020 campaign was "Love. Trust. Protect. #GetVax." The campaign sought to bring to mind the love people have for their children, themselves, and their communities; the trust in vaccines’ ability to save lives; and the protection they provide from diseases for everyone, everywhere.

At the regional level, materials like posters, social media cards, stickers for children, infographics, videos, and animations were prepared to support countries with their national VWA campaigns and for use as part of the regional campaign. The materials used photos that showed the great population diversity who all benefit from vaccination in the Americas.
SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

The social media campaign took place in PAHO’s regional accounts in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. On these platforms, the VWA campaign had a wide reach among the more than 900,000 combined followers. Unfortunately, a detailed report from the social media aspect of the campaign was not available due to limited resources that needed to be used in the pandemic response.

Likewise, PAHO country offices’ social media accounts shared the different materials, allowing for a greater reach with key messages on the importance of vaccination, the safety and efficacy of vaccines, and the role of immunization in protecting communities from dangerous diseases.
Tweet Chats are public conversations on Twitter that allow people to connect from various backgrounds: the general public, academics, researchers, governments, and other key audiences.

For VWA 2020, a Tweet chat with the general public was held regarding vaccination and immunization services during the COVID-19 pandemic. PAHO addressed questions on a range of topics, from vaccination of newborns whose mothers had COVID-19, to the continuation of routine immunization services. The Tweet chat offered a unique opportunity to respond to the questions and concerns of people from around the Region while also promoting the importance of vaccination as an essential service during the pandemic.

Interest in the VWA Tweet Chat inspired new social media conversations between PAHO immunization experts and the public, which have continued throughout the year.

Example: https://twitter.com/pahowho/status/1258479929815154692
SOCIAL MEDIA IN COUNTRIES

ARGENTINA

Twitter

COLOMBIA

Twitter

Facebook

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The Brazilian cartoon “Monica and Friends” helped spread the word about the importance of immunization for the 18th Vaccination Week in the Americas. The collaboration was written about in a press release that was shared with the Region.

“Monica and Friends” appeared in social media materials for the campaign. Mauricio de Sousa, Brazil’s most famous and honored cartoonist, creator of Monica and Friends and more than 300 characters that populate his popular comics, magazines and books, was honored by PAHO in 2003 as a "Champion of Health of the Americas" for his work communicating public health messages to children and adults. According to Sousa, taking part in campaigns like this is essential to stop vaccine-preventable diseases. The artist expressed his commitment to the health of the people of the Americas and highlighted the important role vaccines play in saving lives and protecting everyone from disease.

Monica and Friends joins the list of other celebrities and artists who have lent their voices to the Vaccination Week in the Americas campaign, including Jamaican Olympic gold medalist Usain Bolt, Uruguayan soccer star Edinson Cavani, Chilean television star Don Francisco, the characters from Sesame Street, and South-American singer-songwriter Ricardo Montaner, among others.
COLOMBIA. SAVING LIVES AT HOME: VACCINATION CONTINUES DURING PANDEMIC

Colombia implemented an innovative strategy to ensure comprehensive family immunization during VWA. In Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá, vaccinators began a home-based vaccination campaign, equipped with personal protective equipment to ensure their safety and the safety of others.

The vaccinators had the objective of achieving coverage of over 95% with the 21 biologicals that the national government offers for free of charge, in order to protect the population from 26 vaccine-preventable diseases (VPD).

The purpose of these activities, promoted by Colombia’s National Immunization Program, was to avoid outbreaks of VPD during the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent health services from becoming overwhelmed.

Read the full story here (in Spanish).

PERU. TWO VACCINES TO PROTECT PREGNANT WOMEN AND THEIR BABIES IN PERU’S AMAZON REGION

Nurses at the Progreso Health Center in the District of San Juan, Loreto, tell of their day spent doing home visits to pregnant women to vaccinate them against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis, in addition to offering them vaccination against the flu.

In 2019, the Ministry of Health introduced the Tdap vaccine for pregnant women. Mothers who are protected against whooping cough also transfer the antibodies to their babies, who will be protected during the first weeks of life, when they still are too young to be vaccinated directly. A single dose of this vaccine administered to pregnant women during the second or third trimester of each pregnancy protects not only the mothers but also the newborns at their most vulnerable stage, thus helping to reduce disease and death in children under 1.

Read the full story here.

To view the photo album, visit the following link:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/pahowho/albums/72157714107245392

This story reflects the situation in Peru in December 2019.
During VWA, PAHO specifically emphasized the topic of immunization with the media. PAHO’s director defended immunization as an essential service during the pandemic in her weekly press briefing. Additionally, the following press releases were sent out:

Following the successes of Vaccination Week in the Americas, other WHO regions started similar initiatives, with each one adapted to the realities of their respective countries and territories.

In 2012, this global movement culminated in the establishment of World Immunization Week (WIW)\(^9\). Each year, WIW in conjunction with VWA, countries have come together to raise awareness on the importance of immunization and to vaccinate different populations across the globe, making a special effort to reach people who may not have regular access to health services, including indigenous peoples, migrants, border populations, and people living in rural/urban fringes.

WIW was endorsed at the 65th World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2012 through Resolution 65.18\(^10\) and is officially held during the last week of April each year.

The main goal of the campaign is to urge greater engagement around immunization globally and the importance of vaccination in improving health and wellbeing of everyone, everywhere throughout life.

### 2020 CAMPAIGN

With the slogan #VaccinesWork for All, the WIW campaign took place April 24-30 with a focus on how vaccines — and the people who develop, deliver and receive them — are heroes by working to protect the health of everyone, everywhere.

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\(^9\) For more information on World Immunization Week, please visit: [https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-immunization-week/2020](https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-immunization-week/2020)

2020 CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

- Demonstrate the value of vaccines for the health of children, communities and the world.
- Show how routine immunization is the foundation for strong, resilient health systems and universal health coverage.
- Highlight the need to build on immunization progress while addressing gaps, including through increased investment in vaccines and immunization.
- Given that WHO had designated 2020 the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, WHO highlighted nurses and midwives for their crucial role as early vaccine champions for new parents and parents-to-be.