
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 23 FEBRUARY 2022

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

Last week, there were 2.2 million new COVID cases in the region, a 28% decline as compared to the previous week. And, after six consecutive weeks of increases, we saw deaths fall for the first time since the beginning of the Omicron wave, to 29,000 new deaths reported in our region, a drop of 9%.

But many places are still facing the crest of the infection surge.

Although cases dropped by a third across North America, Mexico reported a 70% increase in new infections. And while deaths declined in the United States, these rates are still among the highest that we've seen throughout the pandemic.

Across Central America, deaths dropped by 17%. However, Nicaragua saw cases surge by a third. ICU admissions and deaths continued to rise in Honduras.

While deaths decreased overall in South America by 13%, some places continue to report spikes. In Chile, for instance, ICU admissions accelerated by a quarter and deaths increased by 37%.

Although new cases dropped across the Caribbean by 44%, more than half of the 13 countries and territories that reported increases in deaths in our region were in the Caribbean. In the Bahamas, the virus continues to hit vulnerable groups – it's estimated that some 10% of health care workers are currently in quarantine due to COVID-related exposures.

Grenada reported a 50% increase in ICU admissions, while Jamaica's rose by 23%, and Guadeloupe had a 9% rise as compared to the previous week.

These trends show that many places are still in the midst of the Omicron surge, so we must stay vigilant and uphold the measures that have been proven to save lives.

Today, I want to give a specific update on an area that remains especially vulnerable to COVID - my home, the Caribbean.

The Caribbean is home to over 44 million people. It is a diverse part of our region, with many inequalities, that has struggled during the pandemic.

So far, we've been able to reach 63% of the eligible populations with lifesaving COVID vaccines, thanks to the tireless efforts of governments, healthcare workers and communities.

But this is a picture with many contrasts – while 91% of people in the Cayman Islands have been fully vaccinated, less than 1% of Haitians have received all their doses.

In fact, out of 13 countries and territories in the Americas that have not yet reached the WHO's goal of 40% coverage, 10 are in the Caribbean.

Because of this, today the Caribbean remains especially vulnerable to COVID.

And there are varying reasons for the low coverage.

Even though limited vaccine supply is less of a barrier now, two conditions that are necessary to scale-up campaigns to the farthest corners are still missing: In some countries, vaccination centers are located in central areas, which may be far from the people who need them the most.

Also, some countries are short-staffed, with doctors and nurses experiencing severe burn-out.

And then, there are those who remain unvaccinated by choice.

To understand why, our teams have been exploring people's attitudes towards vaccines.

In one PAHO study published in the Lancet, we found that the vast majority of health workers are eager to use the vaccine to protect themselves and are doing all they can to reach as many people as possible.

But some still want more information.

They have questions on potential side effects, or on how long the benefits of the vaccine last. These are legitimate questions that must be acknowledged and addressed, so that we can better protect our health workers and everyone else.

Some people have not gotten vaccinated because they no longer see COVID as a risk to themselves.

Yet the spread and death toll of Omicron have shown that underestimating this virus only fuels the pandemic and leads to more suffering.

We have the tools to turn the tide on vaccinations in the Caribbean.

Nearly 700 million people across our region have already received their full vaccination course - over 21 million people in the Caribbean alone -- giving us real-world data to show that vaccines are safe and effective against COVID-19.

And there is much we can do to reach unvaccinated people.

First, we must tailor our interventions to the needs of those who remain vulnerable in each country.

In Jamaica, for example, this means reaching out to casual workers and young men, who have the lowest vaccination rates in the country.

In Trinidad and Tobago, this means engaging nurses, who are trusted sources of medical information but also the health workers most likely to remain unprotected.

And in Barbados, which is known for having some of the highest percentage of centenarians in the world, it means protecting those on the cusp of turning 100 years so they can continue to live healthy lives.

Second, we must make it easier for people to get a vaccine closer to home.

This can be done by investing in staff and infrastructure, to ensure that vaccination centers are closer to the people who need them the most and that hours of operations are convenient for working adults. We are collaborating with governments across the region to do just that.

In Haiti -- which remains one of the least vaccinated countries in the world and a top priority for PAHO --we are working tirelessly with partners to establish at least one vaccination site in each commune, enabling us to finally expand coverage well beyond today's very low levels.

And lastly, we must also create spaces for open dialogue to address our communities' concerns.

In one PAHO and UNICEF survey that was supported by USAID, 51% of vaccine hesitant people in the Eastern Caribbean were open to changing their minds after seeing more scientific and medical information.

This means working with trusted voices and community leaders to reach people where they are with the right information.

Dialogue, trust, and outreach are the tools that we must use to get more vaccines into arms and ultimately to save lives.

As a doctor from the Caribbean who has dedicated her life to public health, I want to make a special appeal to the people in the region:

The best decision you can make for your health right now is to get a vaccine against COVID. The pandemic is not over, and a new variant can emerge at any point.

If you have been vaccinated but you know someone who has not been, please reach out to them, listen to their concerns and share information. Help them find a vaccination site.

We have the power as a community to overcome these barriers and reduce the toll of this virus on our people.