
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—05 NOV 2020

05 NOVEMBER 2020

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

It has been another sobering week in the fight against COVID-19: in the last seven days, there have been nearly one million new infections reported in the Americas, making it one of the worst weeks on record for COVID-19 infections in our region.

Since the start of this pandemic, more than 20 million people have been infected with COVID-19 in the Americas, and nearly 650,000 have died. We are home to more than one in four cases and a third of the world's coronavirus deaths.

The US has also broken records this past week for daily new infections reported, and we are seeing increasing trends in some provinces and states in other North American countries – Mexico and Canada – which are driving trends in the region.

However, while the cumulative number of new infections is high and continues to increase, it is important to remember that the perseverance shown by many countries in implementing public health measures has been effective in flattening the curve and protecting health services:

Chile, for example, has been able to reduce its rates of infection four-fold since July. Similarly, Paraguay has also reduced trends since September after experiencing a peak in infections. And while Uruguay has experienced clusters of cases, it has been able to avoid community transmission.

This underscores why it is so important that national and local authorities implement all necessary public health measures, and why all of us must continue to take individual precautions - Because they work. But it is vital that we maintain this collective effort to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and our health care systems until the end of the pandemic.

However, as we move towards the end of the first year of this global pandemic, we must also ensure that our mental health, as well as our physical health, remains a key consideration.

WHO, PAHO, health experts and specialized institutions have warned countries of the toll the virus could take on the mental health of people in our region and across the world. Today these warnings have become reality.

COVID-19 has disrupted our daily routines, forced millions into months-long isolation, devastated our economies and caused an unimaginable loss of life.

We have all been shaken – Surveys from several countries show that the pandemic has increased the level of stress for many in our region, and some of us are battling anxiety and depression.

The longer this crisis continues, the bigger the impact it will have on our collective wellbeing. And we know that these effects are likely to endure long after the pandemic is eventually brought under control.

Health care workers have been particularly affected by COVID-19. More than any other group of workers, they have been making extraordinary personal sacrifices and difficult decisions on the frontlines of the pandemic for months.

Preliminary data from the HEROES study being conducted in 6 countries in Latin America reveal some worrying signs: One in five health workers is experiencing symptoms of depression. In Chile, nearly one in ten has suicidal thoughts. Over 75% of health workers are concerned about getting COVID-19 and virtually all are worried about infecting their loved ones.

We are also concerned about vulnerable groups whose wellbeing has been disproportionately impacted by the virus.

This includes people living with disabilities, older adults, those with pre-existing health conditions, migrants, and ethnic minorities. These groups are shouldering additional stress, making them more susceptible to mental health challenges, so support to these groups is especially vital in times like these. And, of course, people who may already be facing mental health problems and substance abuse disorders are at even greater risk.

Countries across our region have long recognized mental health as an important priority, and while most have acknowledged that mental health services are essential during the pandemic, a new survey conducted by PAHO and WHO shows that countries are falling short in implementing mental health services at a time when mental health support is paramount.

Data from 29 countries show that while 27 of them have integrated mental health into their COVID-19 plans, only two are adequately funded.

Countries have also failed to sufficiently staff their mental health services, so care may be more out of reach than ever before: psychotherapy, substance abuse support and access to medication have been significantly disrupted and remain unavailable to many who urgently need them.

Even efforts to expand access through telemedicine have still not reached the majority of those who need it.

Yet individuals living with mental health and substance abuse disorders need reliable care and support, especially now.

To recognize mental health as a priority is not enough, countries must ensure that mental health services have the staffing, availability, and financial resources they require and deserve.

To start, every country in our region must offer mental health and psychosocial support as essential services during this pandemic.

We also need countries to adapt care, so it is available where and when people need it.

We have seen how health systems across our region have strived to protect other essential services like immunizations and diabetes check-ups by leveraging community health workers, expanding telemedicine, and offering care outside of traditional health settings. We need the same inventiveness and commitment to adapting mental health support during the pandemic. Community-based mental health services, that are integrated into primary health care, are a pillar of mental health services and vital to ensuring that no one gets left behind. Support should be provided where it is needed the most: close to the community.

And while we are hopeful about innovations in telemedicine, which most countries are leaning on to offer mental health support amid the pandemic, countries must expand remote support so everyone who needs help can have access.

PAHO has been helping countries expand their telehealth programs since June of this year. And we have also deployed emergency funds so countries can provide mental health care in vulnerable settings.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that will have effects lasting for years to come. And if there is one thing we have learned; it is that mental health is intrinsically linked to physical health – particularly when it comes to ensuring that communities are best equipped to face the challenges brought about by this pandemic.

We urge countries to fulfill their promise to people living with mental health conditions and those battling substance use disorders, so that they have the resources and support they need now and in the future, as we manage the lasting effects of the pandemic.

The investments countries make today will not just strengthen their COVID-19 responses but will help us all build back better.