

THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

OFFICE OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS

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Related Agencies

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U.S. Role in Global COVID-19 Vaccine Equity

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Introduction

Thank you, Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished Members of the Committee. It is my pleasure to represent the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Office of Global Affairs (OGA) before your committee today to discuss the role of the United States in global COVID-19 vaccine equity.

The global COVID-19 response is a whole-of-government effort. As the country's health agency, HHS leads the interagency in providing technical expertise on public health, research and development, and associated regulatory issues. We have also helped countries prepare for, implement, and evaluate COVID-19 vaccination efforts, drawing on our long-standing relationships with ministries of health throughout the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused more than five million deaths worldwide, more than half of these in low- and middle-income countries. Through the extraordinary efforts of our colleagues at HHS and across the U.S. government, we have made enormous progress in vaccinations. However, even as we make progress here at home, we know that our ability to end this pandemic depends on making progress around the world.

Role of OGA

OGA represents the Department in global matters relevant to health, and our programmatic and regional teams engage and represent the United States on health matters in critical global forums and partnerships such as the G7, G20, QUAD (i.e. Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Caribbean Community and Common Market, and Africa CDC. In addition, OGA leads the U.S. government on engagement with the World Health Organization. OGA serves on the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A) Facilitation Council, which serves to guide actions across the vaccine, therapeutics, diagnostics, and health systems and response pillars of ACT-A.

Our HHS Health Attachés, based in strategic posts worldwide, have played and will continue to play a critical role in this pandemic. HHS Health Attachés represent the United States in policy negotiations that touch on the intersection of health, and act as a resource for representatives of other U.S. agencies. They have forged long-standing and trusted relationships with colleagues at our counterpart Ministries and at the World Health Organization (WHO), and have been instrumental in our global COVID-19 response efforts. For example, our Health Attachés in Brazil, India, and Mexico have ensured both U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and local regulators are at the negotiating table to spur vaccine authorizations. Similarly, they have also linked the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with their counterparts to understand emergency needs and related support. COVID-19 has reinforced the importance of global partnerships, and the HHS Health Attachés are critical to forging enduring relationships, building technical capacity, and ensuring sustained strategic dialogue with key partners.

Global Vaccination Commitment

President Biden announced ambitious targets to accelerate global vaccination at the Global COVID-19 Summit in September, with an emphasis on health equity. This includes supporting the WHO goal of at least 70 percent of the population fully vaccinated with quality-assured, safe, and effective vaccines in every country and income category by mid-2022. This announcement was backed by the United States' commitment to deliver 1.1 billion vaccine doses to where they are needed most, with no strings attached. And the United States continues to build on its commitments – only last week, Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, announced a partnership with Johnson & Johnson (J&J) to reach people in conflict zones and other humanitarian settings that cannot be reached by traditional government-sponsored vaccination campaigns.

In the midst of the pandemic, the United States has demonstrated its global leadership, and we are actively working with other countries, international organizations, the private sector, philanthropic organizations, and civil society to deliver on the President's commitments.

I am proud to report that the United States has donated more vaccines worldwide than any other nation. To date, we have donated more than 225 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to more than 100 countries and economies. This progress is the result of sustained, concerted, and collective interagency action, which includes our colleagues at the White House, the State Department, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, among others.

Areas for Continued Focus

Critical areas of focus for our continued efforts, which will be critical to our success include: vaccine readiness, vaccine confidence, supply chain, health system capacity, and strengthened multilateral institutions. To date, only about 4 percent of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose of vaccine. About 10 percent of the population in Africa is vaccinated, compared to the more than 50 percent in North America and Europe. We know this is unacceptable. International leaders must accelerate vaccine production, increase donations, and fulfill their pledges to COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), the vaccines pillar of ACT-A.

We have witnessed the challenges of enduring global inequity as the majority of vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics have remained in higher-income countries. Let me be clear – this is not a zero-sum-game. As we have learned from previous global health challenges -- from HIV to H1N1 to Ebola, and now again with COVID-19 -- no one is safe anywhere until all of us are safe everywhere.

Without concerted global action, there will be additional cases, illness, and death of people in the U.S. and throughout the world. If we do not accelerate global vaccination efforts, we remain under constant threat from new and emerging variants. Additionally, urgent action is also needed to increase access to diagnostics and therapeutics, and to strengthen the ability of countries to use these tools to save lives now and preserve capacities in health systems to respond. So long as COVID-19 remains a public health threat, health systems worldwide remain at risk of being overburdened, threatening access to basic services such as routine immunizations and antenatal care as well as causing supply chain disruptions for essential health products. We

will also continue to see disruption in other sectors, including the domestic and global economy. Vaccinating the world is a strategic, and more importantly, moral imperative.

Advancing equity has been a cornerstone of this Administration's overall agenda – our efforts in the global health space are no exception. As we continue to respond to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we must think critically about how to prioritize and strengthen health equity between and within countries – not only focusing on the distribution of vaccines and therapeutics, but also exploring ways forward on expanding regional and local manufacturing capacity building, facilitating voluntary technology transfers on mutually agreed terms regardless of income status, strengthening global governance mechanisms, and building more resilient health systems.

And our multilateral institutions, including WHO, must be strong, which includes its regional offices such as Pan American Health Organization in the Americas and the Western Pacific Region. Areas of current focus for WHO are strengthening overall global health governance, existing international instruments, and beginning a dialogue on elements of a new instrument on pandemic preparedness to ensure we are able to mitigate the impacts of a future pandemic threat before they become catastrophic. Discussions are underway and HHS's continued leadership role on these issues will be instructive as Congress considers legislation related to pandemic preparedness and future threats.

Conclusion

Thank you for your attention and support to continue to champion, amplify, and mobilize global efforts in Congress.

Enduring political will, ensuring sufficient resources, strengthening global partnerships and institutions, sharing innovations, and advancing health equity will put us on a more secure path toward ending this global pandemic, and preventing the next one. Thank you to the committee and my fellow panelists, and I look forward to your questions.