

White House Press Briefing
07/20/21
Time N/A
1 minute and 12 seconds

AAMER MADHANI: An aide to a Speaker Pelosi tested positive for a COVID after having contact with the Texas delegation that's been around. Can you confirm that a White House official has also tested positive? And I'm wondering, what does that mean for prospects of the Texas delegation being able to sit down with the President at some point at the White House?

JEN PSAKI: Sure. Well, first let me confirm that yesterday, a fully vaccinated White House official tested positive for COVID-19 off campus. In accordance with our rigorous COVID-19 protocols, the official remains off campus as they wait for confirmatory PCR test. The White House medical unit has conducted contact tracing, interviews, and determined no close contacts among White House principals or staff, or the President. The individual has mild symptoms. We know that there will be breakthrough cases, but as this instance shows, cases in vaccinated individuals are typically mild. The White House is prepared for breakthrough cases with regular testing. This is another reminder of the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines against severe illness or hospitalizations. And of course, we wish our colleague a speedy recovery. In terms of a meeting, there has not been a meeting planned and there hasn't been change to that, so I wouldn't say it has an impact on that.

(...)

Time N/A
1 minute and 57 seconds

KELLY O'DONNELL: Have there been any other cases of breakthrough COVID among the White House staff? And would you commit to publicly confirming cases if others occur in the future?

PSAKI: There have been. I will say that according to an agreement we made during the transition to be transparent and make information available, we committed that we would release information proactively if it is commissioned officers. We continue to abide by that commitment.

O'DONNELL: Does this give you any sense of changing protocols related to the President, Vice President, other senior staff based on this set of facts, given the fact you've always said vaccinations, while very helpful, or not fool-proof? So should there be a different posture for the President?

PSAKI: Well, our protocols are in alignment with the highest standards and the guidance of our public health experts, so let me just remind you all, because I'm sure you don't have it handy, to what those protocols are that remain in place. Regular testing of those surrounding and meeting with the President. For those who have closer proximity, they are tested more regularly than those who have less proximity. Ensuring those interacting with the President are following CDC

guidance regarding mask wearing and distancing, actively monitoring the health of our campus and the larger community in collaboration with public health and medical experts. We have a robust infrastructure to ensure compliance with these protocols, and we're asking staff to also monitor themselves for symptoms, and stay off campus if they develop symptoms. So the news today is that while breakthrough cases will happen, the vaccines are effective and prevent against serious illness and death. We've seen that statistically across the country with 99.5 percent of cases in hospitals being for individuals who are not vaccinated, and we will continue to abide by CDC guidelines.

O'DONNELL: Really briefly, you did say there were others. Can you quantify what number are we talking about? How many breakthrough cases have you had?

PSAKI: I don't have more details on that. I will see if there's more we can provide.

(...)

12:24:36 p.m.

3 minutes and 7 seconds

PETER DOOCY: More than 10 percent of the traveling party with these Texas Democrats now claim to have a breakthrough case. Is there any concern that this trip that was intended to advocate for voting rights is now a superspreader event in Washington?

PSAKI: Well, I would say that's not a characterization we're making from here. We certainly understand there will be breakthrough cases, even vaccines that are incredibly effective are not foolproof. They're not 100 percent effective. We've seen that. Here's the good news though. We know that these vaccines, that these individuals, I think, if I'm correct have, have been vaccinated, it means it protects from death. It protects from serious illness. It protects, for the most part, from hospitalization, so that is a good sign.

DOOCY: Now that COVID-19, after contact with those Democrats, has reached the White House, what is your message to these Texas Democrats?

PSAKI: Our message continues to be, "thanks for standing up for voting rights, and the rights of Americans to have their voices heard at the voting booth," and we appreciate their efforts in that regard.

DOOCY: And certain places are bringing mask mandates back now, including for vaccinated people. What does President Biden think about that?

PSAKI: Well Peter, we know that some employers, hospitals, health systems, colleges and universities, which we've seen put in place mask mandates, some large and small employers have chosen to take this step. That's entirely appropriate. That's their decision to make. That's not an initiative where we're instituting from the federal government, but we know that companies, private sector employees, health institutions, educational institutions, will take steps in order to

keep the people in their community safe.

DOOCY: Six months ago, the President asked Americans to wear masks for 100 days. As the delta variant spreads, is there a possibility that he's going to make a similar ask down the line?

PSAKI: Well, nothing has changed with the guidance that we are providing to the American public. If you are vaccinated, you do not need to wear a mask. If you are not vaccinated, the public health officials from the federal government recommend you wear a mask. Anything we would determine would be guided by our health and medical experts. Go ahead.

ED O'KEEFE: So, I just want to back up here to this breakthrough case here at The White House.

PSAKI: Yep.

O'KEEFE: You confirmed today there's been a breakthrough case.

PSAKI: Yep.

O'KEEFE: But you're also confirming there have been other breakthrough cases.

PSAKI: Yep.

O'KEEFE: But you had not previously disclosed that there had been.

PSAKI: And that's correct. We had also committed during the transition that I think there's hundreds, thousands of people who work on the federal government, as you all know. And we had committed during the transition that if it was a commissioned officer, who are the highest level ranking people in the White House and in this building here, that we would make that information publicly available. We stand by that commitment.

O'KEEFE: So if it's anyone below that, you don't feel the need to let people know?

PSAKI: Well again, that's the commitment we made. I'm here talking to all of you today and sharing with you information about the individual who has — who has received a positive test yesterday.

O'KEEFE: Right. More broadly, has there been any more discussion? I know you've been asked this before because it continues to happen. Has there been any more discussion about having the CDC or some other entity track the number of breakthrough cases —

PSAKI: They do track.

O'KEEFE: — okay.

(....)

12:31:19 p.m.

13 seconds

RACHEL SCOTT: Just a quick followup, thanks Jen, on Kelly's question. So, would the administration ever provide the number of breakthrough cases that have happened within the administration thus far? Should we not expect to receive a number on that?

PSAKI: I said I'd be happy to check on the status of that, sure.

(....)

12:32:56 p.m.

21 seconds

NANDITA BOSE: Just a quick question on the White House official testing positive —

PSAKI: Sure.

BOSE: — how is The White House preparing for vaccine hesitancy to go up now that people who are vaccinated are still contracting the virus? I mean, do you expect that to really stop people from getting vaccinated around the country?

PSAKI: I don't think we've seen data to suggest that.

(...)

12:37:03 p.m.

3 minutes and 4 seconds

PHIL MATTINGLY: And just one more quick one. My colleague reported that there've been some high-level discussions — regular high-level discussions between White House officials and Fox News about coverage related to the pandemic and vaccines over the course of the last several weeks and months. Can you elaborate at all in terms of what those entailed and if you guys feel like you've had an effect on the coverage of those issues?

PSAKI: Sure. Well, let me first say that we've been in touch with every network and many, many media outlets about coverage of COVID-19 to make sure people have accurate information, to voice concerns when we have them and I think all know we're never shy when we have an issue with a story. So that's really the frame we're looking at here. So we understand also the importance of reaching Fox's audience about the COVID-19 vaccines and their benefits and like we are with all of you here today, we, of course, are in regular contact, and we also make efforts to have officials out on a range of networks to talk about COVID-19. We don't see it as a partisan issue. We don't see vaccines as a political issue. It's an issue about keeping Americans

safe. Sure. Go ahead.

TAMARA KEITH: Thank you. As the White House COVID team has done contact tracing, have you had any cases of staff-to-staff transmission? Have you had COVID spread in the White House through these breakthrough infections?

PSAKI: I would have to check with our team and see if that's been an issue. I don't have that data in front of me.

KEITH: Okay. And how many commissioned officers are there? Like, what is the universe? What is the numerator and denominator in breakthrough infections that you're willing to talk about?

PSAKI: I'll — we can get you the exact number. I think that's publicly available, but we'll get you the exact number too.

KEITH: Yeah and — and just a messaging question, I know that you say there's no data to show that talking about breakout infections could affect people's willingness to get vaccinated, but does it create a messaging challenge for this White House to have breakthrough infections, when there are people who say, "why should I get the vaccine if I'm going to get COVID anyway?"

PSAKI: Well, I think that's a little bit of projection, to be honest. What we're seeing across the country is that almost 70 percent of adults are vaccinated. We're seeing especially high numbers among people who are over 65, over 55, et cetera. There are also some numbers that I heard about yesterday that I thought were quite incredible. 86 percent of teachers across the country are vaccinated. We've also seen in recent polls, which I think was a bit of a wake-up call, I think there was a CBS poll out this weekend, that individuals who are vaccinated in this poll were more concerned about the delta variant than individuals who were not, by a pretty large margin, so I would say part of our objective here is also to communicate clearly that if you're vaccinated, you are protected. If you get a case of COVID, it will be mild. If you are not vaccinated, you could be — we hope not — but among the people who go to the hospital and get very sick from the virus. The data is very clear, so part of our objective is also not to stoke fear among people who are vaccinated, because the data is pretty clear about their protection.

(...)

12:40:41 p.m.
37 seconds

ANNE GEARAN: Do — does the White House know which Buccaneers players are — were vaccinated and which weren't? And is there any concern that the President would be standing as close to and shaking hands with unvaccinated players?

PSAKI: The President is vaccinated and he, that means, is protected. We follow public health guidelines and guidelines provided by our own medical experts.

GEARAN: So did you ask the players or anybody with the team to provide information on who was vaccinated and who was not?

PSAKI: We have certain protocols we have in place for visitors. I can see if we can provide those more detailed [sic] to all of you as well.

(....)

12:41:41 p.m.

1 minute and 17 seconds

STEVEN PORTNOY: Sorry for asking a redundant question, but just to nail it down.

PSAKI: Sure.

PORTNOY: The individual who did test positive is in fact a commissioned officer?

PSAKI: No.

PORTNOY: Not a commissioned officer.

PSAKI: Correct.

PORTNOY: Okay. Are you —

O'DONNELL: Resident staff?

PSAKI: I — we're not going to — out of the privacy of an individual, we're not going to provide more details. What I'm conveying to all of you is that a commissioned officer, we would proactively provide the details of those individuals to all of you.

PORTNOY: I'm glad I asked. Thank you.

PSAKI: I appreciate you asking too. Sorry. I didn't realize I was unclear there.

PORTNOY: No, but are you aware of any commissioned officers who have tested positive and a breakthrough case?

PSAKI: If there had been, we would have released those names publicly to you.

BRIAN KAREM: So all the others weren't commissioned as well is what you're saying?

PSAKI: Correct.

PORTNOY: In the office where this individual did work, is there any kind of surveillance testing

that's — that's being undertaken right now? Can you explain what's going on in that office?

PSAKI: Sure. First of all, there's ongoing — there's contact tracing, as I noted, and that has already commenced. As I noted in response to the first question, we did — our White House medical unit did contact tracing interviews and determined no client close contact among White House principals or staff. This individual was out of the office when they were tested yesterday, and they've stayed out of the office. Our staff is also regularly tested either once a week or more, depending on their proximity to principals.

(...)

12:46:39 p.m.

28 seconds

KAREM: First of all, happy six months. And this is about that follow up to Kelly, what she was saying. I spoke to members of the Democratic caucus last night, who think that even six months in, our democracy is hanging by a thread. Is the President aware of that sentiment among the Democratic caucus and what will he do about it?

PSAKI: Well, I think the President has given multiple speeches where he has conveyed the risk that a lack of legislation on voting rights, and a lack of action on voting rights has to our democracy.

(...)

12:48:49 p.m.

54 seconds

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE REPORTER: On what you mean when you say, regular testing for those who are close to the President? Is the President and senior staffers, are they receiving those daily PCR testing that we saw a lot during the pandemic?

PSAKI: I think we've provided this information publicly to all of you, which we can recirculate if that's helpful. But I'm tested twice a week. Many are tested twice a week. Some are tested once a week. That's what I mean. We're all vaccinated.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE REPORTER: The President's not tested daily?

PSAKI: He's tested every two weeks, typically, or around every two weeks and that's part of our protocol.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE REPORTER: Is there a need to re-up that, the daily testing with one of the breakthrough the cases?

PSAKI: Nothing has changed about our protocols. I think what the big takeaway here should be,

is that we have protocols in place, they're stringent protocols. We — they include a range of requirements of our staff, and they also include abiding by public health guidelines and that's something we'll continue to implement from here.