

White House press briefing
07/27/21
12:56:49 p.m.
3 minutes

ALEXANDRA JAFFE: I have a few questions on the CDC's revised masking guidance —

JEN PSAKI: Sure.

JAFFE: — that some vaccinated Americans should wear masks indoors where there's risk of high transmission or currently high transmission. That covers according to the CDC, about 63 percent of the country right now, which has significant or high transmission. So how will the White House get Americans to start wearing masks when they've gone for more than two months without them? Will we see the President speak more about this? I mean, how exactly do you plan to push this publicly? And then along those same lines, on July 4th, the President gave his sort of independence from the virus speech. He declared, "we are closer than ever to declaring our independence from a deadly virus" and "we've gained the upper hand on the virus." Was that declaring premature victory? And are you at all concerned that those statements will make it tougher for you guys to implement this revised guidance now?

PSAKI: Sure. Well, first I know this is slightly awkward timing, but — and I know there's a lot of reporting out there about the CDC guidance. It is not only appropriate for them to make the decisions, it's also appropriate for them to officially announce their own guidance. I will say though, that how we view this, as you asked about, Alex, implementation of their guidelines that they'll outline on a call with all of you later this afternoon, that we are still in the midst of a once in a generation pandemic, battling an ever-evolving virus. We have said since the beginning of June, that the Delta variant, a rising variant that had it — was clear from the beginning, had a great deal of transmissibility, was a threat to people who were unvaccinated. We did more than a hundred interviews with officials conveying exactly that. And the reality is we are dealing with a much different strain of this virus than we were, even earlier in the spring, back in May, when the masking guidance was — was done — provided by the CDC at that time. That is their job. Their job is to look at evolving information, evolving data, an evolving, historic pandemic, and provide guidance to the American public. That's exactly what they will do and what they will provide specific details on later this afternoon.

JAFFE: With respect to the President's comments though, do you, in retrospect, regret those comments? Do you think that that was wise at the time considering they could make it tougher for Americans to take this seriously?

PSAKI: Well, first I would say that in the President's remarks, he also made clear, and I'm quoting him, that, "today, while the virus hasn't been vanquished," he made clear that it was not over. That those who were unvaccinated were still at risk. He made clear that you were protected from serious illness or hospitalization if you were vaccinated. That remains the case. And he encouraged people who were not vaccinated to get vaccinated. But again, the role of the federal government and our public health officials is to continue to look at evolving data, evolving

threats of a historic virus, provide that public health guidance to the American people, to protect more people and save more lives. That's what they're doing.

(.....)

1:02:33 p.m.

2 minutes and 16 seconds

KELLY O'DONNELL: Is the summer of freedom, as the President described it, is that still operative now given the change in the Delta variant?

PSAKI: Well, I would say first, I — I have this little handy chart. I suspected that we might talk a little bit about COVID today, understandably. And what I would note is that what has not changed is the fact that people are — who are vaccinated have a huge deal of protection from serious illness, from hospitalization and from death. And I know Shannon, actually I see her in the back there, asked a good question yesterday about the data so I wanted to give you a little bit of a better understanding of how this data process works. So the data that — that Dr. Walensky, the CDC Director, spoke to back in July was based on data up through the beginning of June or the end of May, the beginning of June. That will be updated in August as it relates to individuals who are hospitalized or get sick who are vaccinated and — what those are unvaccinated, what hospitalizations look like as the percentage breaks down. But this is all based on data from either state officials or health agencies or the Florida Hospital Association as it relates to the Florida specific example here. And how the information flows to your question earlier — yesterday, Shannon, is it goes from hospitals to states, to the CDC. So I'm using this example to show you because this breaks through the reporting of this data. This is from hospital systems that will go to states and what you can see here, Florida, which is one of the states with one of the highest rates of COVID, I should say, officials have said that more than 95 percent of those who were hospitalized were not vaccinated. That is information from last week or just a couple of days ago. North Carolina: unvaccinated makeup more than 99 percent of new COVID cases in May and June. That's from a few weeks ago but still updated data. Colorado: more than 96 percent of Colorado's COVID hospitalizations deaths in the first half of 2021 were among unvaccinated. I'm using these examples because even as the masking guidance is put out later today by the CDC, we are still going to be sending a very clear message to the public that in order to protect yourself, to save your life, save the lives of those around, you need to get vaccinated. Masking is guidance.

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1:06:30 p.m.

1 minute and 52 seconds

WEIJIA JIANG: The CDC data showed though on July 6th that the Delta variant was the prominent strain, 51.7 percent of cases. So what took so long between then and now?

PSAKI: Even higher now, as you know.

JIANG: So that's what led to the change in guidance?

PSAKI: I'm sure you will get on the call with the CDC later this afternoon and I think that's a great question to ask them. Our guidance is based on the public health experts and what they are advising in terms of steps that should be taken. I think it's, though, important to note, it has always been the case that the guidance has been, if you are not vaccinated, to wear a mask. That has not changed. That has been the case from the beginning. And also to get vaccinated if you're not vaccinated.

JIANG: But the President's message was get vaxxed or masked, and now it's get vaxxed and masked in some cases. So does he regret sending the message that it was a binary choice there?

PSAKI: Well, Weijia, I think that those comments were back in May and as I noted at the time, the Delta variant was a — by no means a — the variant that it is today. It was not even a — I can look at this specific data, but it was — 99 percent of cases were not Delta at the time. That was based on guidance from the CDC. Today, they're changing their guidance, they're changing their advice to the American public, their public health advice, based on evolving data and an evolving historical guidance — variant — virus. That's exactly what they should be doing.

JIANG: And what is your message to Americans who are feeling whiplash right now? Why should they trust the same group of health officials who just two months ago told them they don't have to wear a mask anymore inside?

PSAKI: Because our goal is to save their lives and our responsibility and the responsibility of public health officials is to continue to provide updated guidance if it warrants from an evolving virus.

(....)

1:10:39 p.m.

1 minute and 6 seconds

KAREN TRAVERS: And then one on vaccines before you move on. You had just said that the message for unvaccinated Americans has always been to wear a mask, but how concerned is the White House that the message that unvaccinated Americans will hear after this afternoon is that even if you're vaccinated, you now have to wear a mask in some settings and then just say, why bother then on the vaccine?

PSAKI: Well, here's the good news, we're all here. You're all here. You've got millions of people and Americans who watch your broadcasts and watch your shows and listen to you to hear what they should know about how to protect themselves and save their lives. So our message to the American public is we are at war. We continue to be at war with a virus and evolving pandemic. Our responsibility here is to always lead with the science and always lead with the advice of health and medical experts. And we're going to continue to provide information to all

of you about how to protect yourself and save your lives. We're not saying that wearing a mask is convenient or if people feel like it, but we are telling you that that is the way to protect yourself, protect your loved ones, and that's why the CDC is issuing this guidance.

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1:13:22 p.m.

5 minutes and 35 seconds

NANDITA BOSE: Just explicitly when President Biden was presented with this latest guidance from CDC, what was his reaction when he welcomed the guidance back in May? What was his reaction this time? How concerned was he when he was told about this latest guidance?

PSAKI: Concerned in what way?

BOSE: Concerned about, you know, how this will impact the administration's ability to perhaps vaccinate those who do not want to get vaccinated.

PSAKI: I would say first that the President has always said that he is going to be guided by public health experts, by the CDC and what our doctors are recommending. That has always been the case. And there have been discussions as you would expect for months now from the beginning about what steps need to be taken — should be taken to protect from an evolving virus.

BOSE: So he did not explicitly talk about maybe the administration should start worrying about how this impacts your messaging, the work that you're doing on the ground. Did he have anything to say about that?

PSAKI: No. That's not how he looks at this. He looks at — as the President of the United States at a time where we came in with a dangerous distrust in science and government and institutions. He felt — feels it's important to be led by data and scientists. And we'll be helping lead the effort to implement this of course in the federal government.

BOSE: And I did have a follow-up to Kelly's question there.

PSAKI: Sure.

BOSE: Not just when he's traveling, but just when he's at the White House. And even for White House staff. Is there any decision on whether he or staff will start wearing masks?

PSAKI: We will be abiding by public health guidance. And if — and if that is where we fall in the geographical guidance given by the CDC, we will also be following that masking guidance. Go ahead.

PETER DOOCY: Thanks. First on crime. As shootings spike in Chicago, the superintendent of

police there is blaming courts for releasing attempted murderers on electronic surveillance. Does President agree with the superintendent — who was just here earlier this month — that ankle bracelets do not cut down on attempted murder?

PSAKI: I have to tell you, I have not seen these comments or looked at the full context of them. I'm happy to do that after the briefing. I think we know from seeing broadly the rising crime or the rising gun violence across the country, including in cities like Chicago that there needs to be greater assistance, greater efforts to make sure guns don't get in the hands of criminals who could do harm. And more assistance to local police forces and community policing programs as well. The President doesn't just use that as rhetoric. He delivers it with action.

DOOCY: And I know he's in discussions or aware discussions about reforming the police generally. We've got cops now saying that the courts are too soft. Some progressives, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who's saying the courts are too strict. So what does the President think?

PSAKI: Well, I don't think it's a secret the President disagrees at times with Congresswoman — the congresswoman about some aspects of policing. He believes we need to reform our prison system to keep our communities safe, while addressing mass incarceration and by diverting nonviolent drug offenders and taking other steps that will improve rehabilitation and reduce recidivism. If you — but he also believes, let's be clear, if you commit a violent crime and are found guilty and pose a threat to society, you should serve that time. And when you get out, you should have the support you need to successfully reenter society. That's his view.

DOOCY: And on the CDC guidance, why did the President say, "If you've been fully vaccinated, you no longer need to wear a mask. Let me repeat. If you are fully vaccinated, you no longer need to wear a mask" if it was possible that that was going to turn out not to be true.

PSAKI: Well, Peter, I think we're all dealing with an evolving virus where there's no playbook and no historic precedent and what the American people should feel confident in is that we are going to continue to be guided by science, look at public health data in order to provide new guidance if it's needed to save lives to protect the American people. When he made those comments back in May, we were dealing with a very different strain of the virus than we were — than we are today. And Delta's more transmissible. It's spreading much more quickly. It was nearly non-existent in the United States back in May.

DOOCY: And so my last one would be, you guys have been saying this is a pandemic of the unvaccinated. If that is coming from the CDC, is the President satisfied with the leadership at the CDC right now?

PSAKI: The President is satisfied with the fact that they are continuing to look at public health data and provide public health guidance to the American public about how they can protect their lives, and the lives of loved ones around them.

DOOCY: And if it's a pandemic of the unvaccinated still, then why do vaccinated people need to

put the masks back on?

PSAKI: Well Peter, first of all, I would say again just to go back to this chart, which I will handily point to again.

DOOCY: Overwhelmingly unvaccinated.

PSAKI: If you were vaccinated, if you are vaccinated, it can save your life. And I think the clear data shows that this pandemic is killing, is hospitalizing, is making people very sick who are not vaccinated. That still continues to be the case, regardless of what the mask guidance looks like.

DOOCY: But the vaccines work which this sign says that they do, then why do people who've had the vaccine need to now wear masks the same as people who have not had it?

PSAKI: Because the public health leaders in our administration have made the determination based on data that that is a way to make sure they're protected, their loved ones are protected. And that's an extra step given the transmissibility of the virus that people — that they're advising people to take.

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1:21:25 p.m.

1 minute and 16 seconds

KEN THOMAS: Jen, does the President's economic team see any ramifications to this masking policy? Are they concerned at all that it could affect consumer spending or any of the economic projections?

PSAKI: That's a great question. I will say I don't think we're quite at that point. The guidance of course is not, as you know, being released until later this afternoon. I will also say that as we've looked at kind of the economic impact of the Delta variant, one of the things we've looked at is that we have, one, we have programs in place that are meant to be implemented over the course of time to ensure that Americans are getting assistance, getting additional funding into their pockets as needed, which was a lesson learned from the past about ensuring that there wasn't an abrupt halt to economic assistance as we're going through a historic pandemic, still at war with it. And as we're still going through an economic recovery. There's no significant signs at this point of the Delta variants impact in that sense and we'd expect that much of the economic impact would be felt in communities with lower vaccination rates. But we don't expect to turn back the clock to what it was in March of 2020, or even six months ago. But in terms of longer-term analysis, I don't — we're not at that point yet.

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1:26:53 p.m.

1 minute and 1 second

APRIL RYAN: Are we at a point where we are saying that there's just no absolutes when it comes to what's happening in this moment?

PSAKI: No, we're not at that point.

RYAN: Because we're possibly beginning to wear masks again in the building — in buildings. Kids could possibly be wearing masks in school and those who are vaccinated are getting breakthrough COVID cases. So you're saying —

PSAKI: Look, we all have a responsibility to do — is to provide the guidance and clear information that is being presented by public health officials to the American public. Not to project confusion, but to alleviate the confusion. And also it's incumbent upon the public health officials to continue to look at and evaluate and make recommendations based on data to save people's lives and protect people from getting the virus, getting — being hospitalized, or of course dying.