

White House Press Briefing

07/30/21

2:42:34 p.m.

15 minutes

ALEXANDRA JAFFE: And then one more on the CDC document that was just leaked. *The Washington Post* obtained a CDC PowerPoint that just with the situation surrounding the Delta variant, is more dire than the administration has characterized it. I wanted to read a few quotes from it. It said: “Given higher chances of visibility and current vaccine coverage, universal masking is essential to reduce transmission of the Delta Variant.” “Delta variant breakthrough infections may be as transmissible as unvaccinated cases. And “risk of infection is reduced threefold in the vaccinated population.” Um and so President Biden has repeated over and over that this is a pandemic of the unvaccinated, but this PowerPoint seems to raise questions about that. Um, he's also promised to level up with the American people, so his comments yesterday — really, was he getting completely up front about the challenge of the Delta variant? This power point would suggest it's a little bit more dire than — than he laid it out to be and why wasn't that PowerPoint made public? Why did it have to be leaked to the public? And then, lastly, um, I mean, why aren't we seeing universal recommendations for universal masking? Why is it just in the areas of transition when the CDC seems to be suggesting universal masking is needed?

KARINE JEAN-PIERRE: Okay, Alex. That was a lot. No, I appreciate the question. It's actually a very important question we need to — and I'm happy to address all of them. So since May, just wanted to step back a little bit — since May, the CDC and administration have been crystal clear about the increased risk of the delta variant in our pandemic response, and so, I — I just want to run through a couple of examples because this is such an important moment that we're in in fighting this pandemic. So in May, out of the concern of the spread of Delta, we restricted travel to India, where it was growing. That is something that we did in May and so, that, as you know, that was many months ago at this point — or a couple months ago, at this point. In the month of June, doctors from the admin blitzed local constituency and national media with over 400 media interviews with a clear message: Delta is a serious threat and getting vaccinated is the clear solution. So that was in the month of June — for the month of June. Throughout June, the President, Jeff Zients, and our medical experts spoke dozens of times to the threat of Delta — pose — the threat that Delta poses. On July 4th, the President made clear that covid-19, “has not been vanquished and Delta is a powerful variant.” This is what the President said on July 4th and in light of recent reporting, it is worth noting that Dr. Walensky said eight days ago the Delta variant is the most infectious respiratory disease she's been — she's — she has seen in the last 20 years — her 20 years of her career. Our message has always been clear throughout. We need more people to get vaccinated to stop the spread of this variant, and so, we have to continue to make that effort, vaccinated and unvaccinated people infected with Delta have higher viral loads, meaning more virus in their body than with previous variants. The last two did not have that. And so this is what we're seeing in the Delta. High viral loads. I mean, you are more likely to spread it. So in the rare occasions that vaccinated people get Delta in a breakthrough infection, they may be contagious, and this is what we heard from CDC this week and so, the most important takeaway and I want to be really clear about this because this is critical for — for all of you who report about this, and for those who are watching, we should have — to takeaways we

should have from this guidance and any follow up reporting is actually pretty simple. We need more people to get vaccinated. That's the answer. We need more people to get vaccinated. That's if we want to stop the spread of this variant and avoid mutations we can. So, we just need to get more people vaccinated and the good news is that the vaccine — the vaccinations — the vaccines work, so we've got to get out there and make sure people get vaccinated.

KELLY O'DONNELL: Karine, the President said for the early months of this administration that those who were vaccinated and wearing masks and doing all those steps could look toward the Fourth of July as that independence opportunity. We now know the CDC is basing some of his new science on the Fourth of July party that happened in Massachusetts, where the Delta variant was predominant. We saw that vaccinated people were passing it and so forth. Does this give the President pause about making recommendations about what the public can do? Because he encouraged people who were vaccinated together on the Fourth of July, a group that did so is now sort of the poster example for the CDC of what can happen with this period.

JEAN-PIERRE: I mean, you know what Kelly O? His — the President has always said he's going to follow the science and he's gonna listen to public health experts. That's what we do, right? That's why we're — we are all following the CDC guidance on masking. And so that's --- that's our north star as we — as Jen Psaki has this week. Look, the job of all of us in this room is to communicate the truth about where we are in the pandemic, and this is something the President has said from the — from day one and also highlight how we can get out of this pandemic. So the vaccines work. That's the truth. We know masks work. That's the truth. They save lives and prevent spread of this dangerous Delta variant, so we need to help in communicating the actions we are telling the American people to take and getting vaccinated and wearing a mask if you're in an area where there's lots of virus circulating, it's more contagious. You have to wear a mask. I know I have one more question that I actually didn't get to for Alex. And I want to make sure that I answer. Just before the CDC released more data publicly or this data, so --- just wanted to say that the CDC's first and foremost priority is getting the American people information as quickly as possible. And so that's what they did on Tuesday. They got it as quickly as they can. They're going to be releasing this data today, as you know, and it was clear that the fact — it was clear that vaccinated people have the ability to transmit and action needed to be taken quickly, and that's why they did it. They did it ahead of releasing the data, and they're going to do that today, as I just mentioned.

O'DONNELL: But part of this is also in terms of getting information out. Like, why are the doctors not here in the briefing room to take our questions? Why have we not had a Covid briefing? When we got some update from Dr Walensky, that was a phone briefing, provides information, but the public is eager to know more about what the Delta variant can do.

JEAN-PIERRE: You know what, Kelly O? I would --- I would argue that we had the President of the United States speak to this yesterday. He gave a more than 30 minute speech about where we are as a country. I mean, he is a trusted voice. He's the leader of our country.

O'DONNELL: He's not a scientist.

JEAN-PIERRE: No, but we heard from him, right. We heard from the President yesterday. We heard from the President about the delta variant and vaccinations in general the day before yesterday when he was in Pennsylvania, when he was supposed to talk about buy American, which he did, but he let off talking about the vaccinations. We have had our doctors on your networks, on many of the networks that are here talking, probably all of them talking about the Delta variant all throughout these last couple of days, so they have been out there. They've been talking about it. And, yeah, we heard from — directly from Doctor Walensky herself, you know, so this is something that we're going to continue to do. We're going to continue to make sure that we communicate directly with the American people and also hand — work hand in hand with local governments and state governments as well. Go ahead, Weijia.

WEIJIA JIANG: Thank you. Just to follow up on all of that, you mentioned the CDC's data that was released on Tuesday. I think the question is, why doesn't that guidance match the internal memo's guidance because on Tuesday they updated the mask guidance to say you only have to wear in places that have high or moderate transmissibility. The internal memo that was leaked says given higher transmissibility and current coverage, vaccine coverage, universal masking is essential to reduce transmission. So, one, why don't the recommendations match? And, two, should the American public anticipate updated guidance that includes universal masking and also new guidance about large gatherings and how many people should gather, given what we are seeing from Provincetown?

JEAN-PIERRE: Well, as you know, Weijia, we do not make those types of, you know, decisions from here when it comes to the science when it comes to guidance that — that comes from CDC, so the questions that you just asked me. I refer you to CDC or about those slides and the — what you saw in the slides specifically that comes from them, and they will have that specific you know, kind of information for you that you're — you're trying to get here. I will say, though, I think the most important thing and I don't want to get away from this because this is what's the most critical thing here is that people need to get vaccinated. That's the answer. If we want to make sure that we curb this pandemic. that we curb the Covid-19, that we fight — that we win this fight that we're in. We have to get people vaccinated. That's why the President calls this a pandemic for the unvaccinated. We have to make sure that we take care of each other and that they take not just take care of themselves, but take care of each other, and we're talking about our kids who are 12 and under who can't get vaccinated. We're talking about our grandparents, right? We're talking about older people in our lives that we want to make sure you're taken care of. And so, that is, if anything that should be one of the main reasons people get vaccinated to make sure they take care of their families and their community.

JIANG: Has White House review the CDC's internal memo and slides?

JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have anything to — to say about that, and I could look at languages.

JIANG: Okay cause the languages — the analogies are helpful to understand, like, you know there that the delta variant is as contagious as chickenpox or more contagious than the common colder or Ebola. Are these things that they're going to present to the public to help us understand?

JEAN-PIERRE: Well the data is being released today. I believe, right? Right.

JIANG: You mean, so, it will be?

JEAN-PIERRE: It'll be — it'll be available.

JIANG: Okay. Got it. And one more — just — follow-up on Kelly. Of all the weeks not to have a Covid briefing, why this week?

JEAN-PIERRE: I mean, I know that's the question you all are asking me, but they -- the doctors have been on national television all week, speaking to this, answering the questions on your net — on your networks, so they've been out there talking about — they're not hiding. They're actually having the conversations with anchors and hosts in answering the hard questions about the Delta variant, about the CDC masking. And so, they've been out there. They're not hiding. They're actually speaking to this almost every day, so you know, and — and we heard from the President of the United States yesterday for more than 30 minute speech that many of you were in, so —

JIANG: Thank you.

JEAN-PIERRE: Yep. Go ahead, Peter,

PETER DOOCY: Thank you. Building off your point the vaccines work, then why is the President asking vaccinated people to mask up? If there have been just. 0.00035 percent of the 161 million fully vaccinated Americans who have had breakthrough case [sic].

JEAN-PIERRE: Look, Let me give you the facts about the delta variant. And maybe this — This will help Peter. It spreads more than twice as easily for one person To another, and it's spreading rapidly. It is really just across the country, and that is just the fact. Two months ago, only one percent of Covid in the U.S. were Delta. Now? More than 80 percent are Delta. And so, this is where we are today with this vaccine, and so it is. We are listening to the experts, the CDC guidance and this is what they are telling us. If you live in an area that has — that is highly contagious, and that has high levels you have to — they are saying — they are, you know, giving the guidance of wearing a mask to protect yourself and to protect your community and your family. That is the guidance that we're getting.

DOOCY: And some of the preliminary stuff we've seen from the CDC says this new guidance for vaccinated people to mask up is based on data from people who got sick partying in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Has the White House seen any proof that quote is spreading — vaccinated people are spreading Covid who are not going to big parties?

JEAN-PIERRE: Here's what we — we know and I'm just going to repeat again. We need to get people vaccinated. That — that is really the answer here. That is what we're seeing from C — that's what we're hearing from CDC. That's what we're even seeing from the slides is that people need to get vaccinated. That is how we fight the Delta — the delta variant. That is how we find

Covid.

DOOCY: And then last one. The President said yesterday: “it's still a question whether the federal government can mandate the whole country to get vaccinated.” He said. “I don't know that yet.” Does that mean he has asked the Justice Department to see if it's legal?

JEAN-PIERRE: Mhm.

DOOCY: — to make everybody get a vaccine.

JEAN-PIERRE: So, what — when he said that — across — about the mandate across the country, um, you know, I would encourage you to — to read his statement. And make sure you read the contents of his remarks. So, a national vaccine requirement is not under consideration at this time. That's where we are with that.

DOOCY: But has he asked the Justice Department to see if it's even possible?

JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have any more to add to that.

MARYALICE PARKS: Obviously, a lot of questions, obviously, about the super spreader event in Provincetown. More than 800 cases, but 74 percent of people there fully vaccinated. So doesn't that at least you suggest that maybe breakthrough cases aren't rare?

JEAN-PIERRE: But that's not what — that's not what the data shows us. That's not what we've gotten from CDC. We've been — we — know that it is -- the breakthroughs that do happen with vaccinated people are — are rare and so, right now, what the CDC has told us is because they do know that there are some breakthrough cases we have to — we have to make sure we wear masks. And so again, we just have to continue to make sure people get vaccinated. That is the answer. That's how we got to move forward. And that's what we're focused on here at the White House.

PARKS: So we're supposed to see that as more of a one off event? Outlier.

JEAN-PIERRE: No — that's — well — well I'm what I'm saying is that what we're focused on — our message is very, very clear is that we want to make sure that people get vaccinated. That is — yes, this is one event, but what the CDC — what the CDC guidance tells us is that the breakthroughs have been rare. This is what the — the public health officials have said. Like, yes, there are breakthroughs, but they have been rare. But the problem is that they are — it is now contagious, right? And so, that's why they're asking us to wear a mask where, before, with the last two variants that we've seen, we weren't seeing that. We weren't seeing vaccinated people pass that along. And so now that has changed with the Delta variant. That is how serious this variant is. That's why our message continues to be please get vaccinated.

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2:59:38 p.m.

1 minute and 24 seconds

JEFF MASON: Karine, given the seriousness of the Delta variant, are there conversations in the White House or between the White House and its scientific advisers about more lockdowns, partial lockdowns or — or anything along those lines?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, that is something that, you know, I know this was asked to me yesterday. The way we see this is that we have the tools in our tool belt to fight this — this — this variant, to fight this vaccine. And we — we are not — we are not going to head toward a lockdown. We want to make sure that we're doing everything that we can because, after passing the historic rescue plan, we have the resources to make sure that doesn't happen, so our role, again, is to make sure that we get — we get people vaccinated as quickly as possible. Look, this vaccine, these vaccines are free. They're easy to get. It's never been easier to get vaccinated. So that is the number one thing that we're trying to do is making that happen. We have the resources to do that. That's what we've been able to do this past six months. We've been able to get more than 160 million people fully vaccinated, 80 percent of that are — are — are people who are over the age of 65. And so, that's what we're going to continue to do and so, our goal is to make sure that we are not headed toward that, that is not going to be the — the — the direction that we take because we have the tools to prevent that.

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3:03:08 p.m.

1 minute and 38 seconds

PHIL MATTINGLY: It's very clear that those who are vaccinated see few symptoms, hospitalizations, deaths. There's no question about it when you look at the data. How concerned are you guys that people see a headline like that about breakthrough cases or a headline from the slide transmissibility and it undercuts your efforts to say vaccination is the answer, vaccination is the solution?

JEAN-PIERRE: Well, I just talked about what we've seen the last couple of days, the rise in numbers of people getting vaccinated. And so, if anything, we're people — are — are out there, who are unvaccinated clearly getting vaccinated. And so, that's — that's critical. That's important. The numbers and the data shows [sic] that. And so, that's what we're going to continue to do is making sure people can continue to get vaccinated.

SCOTT DETROW: You know, we were being tested every single day. At a certain point, we were not being tested. I'm curious what the current status of staff — White House staff testing is? And whether, given the news about transmission, there are plans to ramp up that testing?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, we're going to continue to follow the guidance that's been led out — that's been — that's been handed and so, all of that's going to be determined — our testing is going to be determined by the White House Medical Unit. We continue to get tested here, the staff does.

So does the President. And so, that's — that's how we'll continue to move forward.

DETROW: So when you say guidance, is that — I think the current guidance is only if there are symptoms if you're vaccinated. Is that the current status?

JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah, but we've also — we've also stated in the past, when you're around — when a staffer is around the President, they get tested. And because of — we're around the President of the United States, we get tested pretty regularly. That's something we shared in the past. There's nothing new there. And we're going to continue to follow what the White House Medical Unit entails for us to do as staff and for the President.

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3:15:00 p.m.

21 seconds

CBS REPORTER: Back to Covid, I know you said it's up to the CDC and health officials to lead on new recommendations. But has the White House or President asked them to look at new restrictions, possible restrictions surrounding large group gatherings given the Delta variant transmission?

JEAN-PIERRE: Again, we follow the science and we listen to health officials. That's how we — we move forward with this.