

White House press briefing (via ABC News Live)

01/10/22

2:38:05 p.m.

6 minutes and 10 seconds

PETER DOOCY: I was home all last week. Isolated for –

JEN PSAKI: Welcome back.

DOOCY: -- thank you. I was isolating with Covid after a positive test like a lot of people watching and a lot of time in front of the TV. I heard the President say –

PSAKI: Did you watch Fox the whole time or other things?

DOOCY: -- I have exhausted the full catalog of Guy Fieri content.

PSAKI: Oh, okay. [LAUGHS]

DOOCY: And, obviously a lot of Fox, but I heard the President say, "Google Covid test near me." So, somebody isolating with Covid. I did that, and the appointments everywhere were completely jammed, so why is it that you guys were so unprepared for the need for testing after the holidays?

PSAKI: Well Peter, I'm happy to see you back and well. I would, second, say that there has been a massive surge in cases as you know, and we're a part of in D.C. and New York and there's been an unprecedented – and in other parts of the country as well – there's been an unprecedented demand for tests. So, what we have done over the course of the last few weeks even before that, is the President quadrupled our testing capacity. Since the summer, we opened 20,000 sites, across the country, and we have also opened additional federal sites, including one in D.C. only recently. He's also provided -- we're also in the process of sending 50 million tests out to community health centers and rural health centers and now we've just – we're in the process of finalizing contracts for 500 million tests.

DOOCY: But –

PSAKI: Well, what can I make one more point and then you can go next? I would just note where we have come from. If you look to a year ago, there were no tests or maybe one, depending on a timeline that was available in the market. Now, we have nine. If you look to about a year ago, there was about 900,000, or maybe slightly higher tests that were being issued every day. Now we're about 10 or 11 million. 300 million tests are done in this country every month, so there's enormous progress being made, but we needed to make sure the market was growing. That's what we've been working on and increase or access to supply and that's what we've been doing.

DOOCY: The tests you're talking about, though, require people to go somewhere and either make an appointment or wait in line. The CDC's guidance is, if you think you have Covid, you're supposed to stay home. You guys said you were gonna mail free tests to people that need them. The President's there on television talking about a winter of severe illness and death. While he's saying that publicly, why weren't you guys doing more to prepare for the winter?

PSAKI: Well, Peter, everyone decides where they're going to go get a test, and, uh, we make a range of options available. You can also purchase tests online. Later today, we'll have more details on how 150 million Americans who have health insurance can get reimbursed for tests. We'll have more details on

that later. The 500 million tests. I noted, and I give you [sic] a little bit of an update on the timeline – we'll have more on the website later this week, so our steps in our process from the beginning has been expanding access to free tests, to make it easy and more accessible for Americans and we're going to continue to build on what we've done today.

DOOCY: But the President talked about a winter of severe illness and death. At the rate you guys are going, these tests are not going to be available until spring, so will you admit that these free tests you guys promised are not going to be ready until after the omicron surge?

PSAKI: I think I gave an update earlier that we'll have -- start to have tests out the door in the coming weeks very soon –

DOOCY: Okay.

PSAKI: -- and again, that's not the only place people can get tests. There are a range of ways people can get tests online. Again, you'll know more about how you can be reimbursed for those tests from here, go to different sites. There are federal sites opening up all around the country.

DOOCY: And we understand that you guys plan to rely on the Postal Service to send out these free tests whenever they're ready, but the Postal Service says they're going to have a staffing shortage because of your vaccine mandates, so would you pull back on the vaccine mandate if it meant getting people these free tests sooner?

DOOCY: The Postal Service also delivered 98, 99 percent of packages on time in advance of Christmas, and they also – their leaders have also said they're eager to take on this challenge, so we welcome that. And we're looking forward to working with them to get these tests out to the public.

DOOCY: And I understand that the science says the vaccines prevent death, but I'm triple vaxxed, still got Covid. You're triple vaxxed, still got Covid. Why is the President still referring to this as a pandemic of the unvaccinated?

PSAKI: Well, I think Peter there's a significant difference between and you just – you just experienced this and not to expose your public health experience, but I can speak to mine as well. I had been tripled vaxxed. I had minor symptoms. There is a huge difference between that and being unvaccinated. You're 17 times more likely to go to the hospital if you're not vaccinated, 20 times more likely to die and those are significant, serious statistics. So, yes, the impact for people who are unvaccinated as far more dire than those who were vaccinated.

DOOCY: Will the President update his language sometime to be more reflective of the fact that people who are triple vaccinated are start catching and spreading Covid?

PSAKI: I think Pe – the President has said, as have we a number of times – that there will be breakthrough cases. There will be people who get Covid here, at different media organizations, at companies around the world, around the country who have been vaccinated. But there is a significant difference between being hospitalized or dying and being vaccinated with more mild symptoms.

DOOCY: And then last one: You guys been very aggressive countering Covid misinformation, so what do you guys think about covid misinformation coming from the Supreme Court and Justice Sonia Sotomayor's false claim that over 100,000 children are in serious condition, many on ventilators?

PSAKI: Well, I'm not going to speak to Supreme Court arguments or statements made in those arguments. But I will tell you that what is at stake here is our effort to protect health workers and, most importantly, protect patients with the CMS rule and also to make workplaces safer with the OSHA rule, which we have confidence in our legal argument for, so I will leave it to them to decide, but that's what's being argued now.

(....)

2:54:03 p.m.

2 minutes and 14 seconds

PHILIP WEGMANN: I know you don't want to weigh in on ongoing litigation before the Supreme Court, but not long ago in this room, the surgeon general told us that Covid misinformation was a public health threat. I'm wondering if the White House is at all concerned given Supreme Court Justices Sotomayor's remarks about omicron variant that maybe the danger is being overhyped and your message is not getting out?

PSAKI: I think I just addressed this. Didn't I answer this question?

WEGMANN: You answered it, but are you worried that there is misinformation that is being spread so much so that even the sitting Supreme Court justice has an inaccurate picture of things?

PSAKI: Again, I'm just not going to weigh in on a specific legal argument made in the court.

WEGMANN: And then I know you've been asked several times about Chicago. You said here. You've said it before. You know, the president clearly wants schools to be open. There's been money that's been allocated. Can we expect that the President will be more aggressive and use the bully pulpit to tell teachers unions in Chicago to get back in the classroom? I mean, this is the third – the nation's third largest school district.

PSAKI: Well again, I would note the President has been very clear – as we have been clear we are on the side of schools being open. That is why he advocated for funding in the American Rescue Plan, and we will continue to convey that clearly because he believes the mental health impact on kids is – could be dire, and it is imperative that kids are in the classroom. More than 95 percent of schools across the country are doing exactly that and we're hopeful that will continue to increase.

WEGMANN: And then one more –

PSAKI: Yeah.

WEGMANN: -- quickly. In December, you and I talked about the Afghan women who had been honored here at the State Department. Sources are telling us right now, currently that some of these women are being told that before they can apply for refugee status, they need to leave the country and if they do that, though, you know, the odds are good that their bank account will be seized and that that process is a two-year-long process. Is there. Are there any additional resources that are going to them currently? I know it's a challenging situation that it's in flux, but is there anything more you can tell us about trying to get them [INAUDIBLE]?

PSAKI: Let me check on more specific details. Obviously, the State Department is overseeing all of our programs, and we're continuing to work to get more people out, but I will see if there's more details on this and ask them specifically.

(....)

2:58:50 p.m.

41 seconds

EDWARD LAWRENCE: On climate change, so the President talks about the transition away from gas cars – recently announcing the mileage standards going up 40 miles per gallon over the next – in the next five years. His push for electric cars – the – The Beast gets an estimated six miles to the gallon. The President's been in office a year. Is there any plans [sic] to make his car electric?

PSAKI: I'm happy to check on that. I mean, this – part of what we talked about is making sure that the fleet owned by the United States, which is very large beyond The Beast – The Beast is just one member – is – is that we work toward making sure we're leading with our focus on energy independence as well, but I am happy to check on his car, otherwise known as The Beast.