

White House press briefing

06/02/22

3:33:19 p.m. [via ABC News Live]

1 minute and 6 seconds

KAITLAN COLLINS: And, on formula, did the President have any conversations with any cabinet secretaries or the FDA commissioner once he was confirmed in February, about the formula shortage before April?

KARINE JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have any meetings to read out specifically on that for you. Look, you know, as — as — as — more — as you all know, the President spoke to this yesterday as more abnormalities were seen in supply and sales started to decrease in April, you know, and because people had asked about this, senior White House staff made — made the President aware of the problem and this was in April. I don't have any calls to read out for you.

COLLINS: Which senior White House staff told the President.

JEAN-PIERRE: So, as you know, the President deals with issues on a regular basis and that — that boils up to him. And it's just — there is no specific person that I can call out to you. But it's the regular way that we — we move forward to through the regular channels. I don't have the specific person. But that's — that's kind of how it goes on any issue, not just this one. It goes through regular channels and senior White House members usually brief him on different issues.

(...)

3:40:23 p.m.

3 minutes and 27 seconds

TYLER PAGER: Just one more on baby formula. I know you got a lot of questions about this, I wondered if you had an opportunity to speak with the President since his comments yesterday where he said he was not informed about the situation until May? Is there — is he — does — has he expressed any disappointment in his staff for not bringing this issue to him earlier? Are there any concerns about the information flow in the White House that, given the manufacturers told him very directly, this would be a problem in February and he didn't know about it until months later. Has he expressed concern about that gap? And how that squares with the whole of government approach you outlined yesterday?

JEAN-PIERRE: Just — just so that we can take a little bit of a step back. You know, Abbott is a major manufacturer and has been clear to the American people that they had shortcomings. They — they made that clear. They made it very clear very recently. The FDA administrator has spoken to this as well. He said the FDA moved too slow and has asked Steve Solomon to lead a review into what happened. The White House took urgent action as it became clear, a shortage emerged and existing actions were not sufficing. It's hard to understand the skills of actions. DPA at a historical pace — Operation Fly formula, expediting timelines for millions of bottles from three to four weeks to 72 hours. These are incredibly important of what we are able to do and 80

million safe bottles being reported and counting. We understand that there's more work to be done. We understand what families are feeling. But this is — we have to remember how this started. We also have to remember with the FDA administrators said as well. He has spoken to this. And so, this is, you know, this is something that we're gonna continue to work on.

PAGER: Right, but that doesn't answer the question about when the President was informed and whether or not he is satisfied with his staff not telling him about what has become a major problem?

JEAN-PIERRE: Well, he spoke — he spoke to when he was informed. That's — he spoke to that yesterday, which was in April. And you're asking me about the process, is he disappointed? Look, again, I'm telling you, the administrator of FDA spoke to this. They moved too slowly. He has said that Steve Solomon is going to lead an after action review on what happened and when the shortages are merged and actions by the FDA and USDA did not suffice to prevent any consumer impact, the White House led urgent — an urgent emergency and administrative-wide action with FDA. Fly Formula, as I just mentioned —

PAGER: But that's the FDA administrator. That's not the President. Those are two different people.

JEAN-PIERRE: No, but I'm telling you the process, I'm telling you what happened. I'm telling you that the FDA moved too slowly, I'm telling you that this happened on the side of Abbott and this — what FDA tried to do at first was they — they they called out Abbott for safety concerns, right? The most important thing here is that we have — we have — we have to make sure that babies have safe formula. We have to make sure that American families feel comfortable. So, FDA did their part here. But, he also admitted that they moved too slowly and once we saw that the supplies were not meeting the demand, we acted. We took urgent action. So that is the way that it happened. That is the way the timeline was laid out. And so this is — you may not like my answer, but this is the way that we see it in answering your question there.

(....)

3:46:33 p.m.

6 minutes and 56 seconds

KELLY O'DONNELL: Can we ask you to go back on the issue of who briefed the President on baby formula. To say that there is no specific person is not a satisfactory answer when you have senior assistants to the president. There is a paper trail, I'm sure, about briefings to the president. There's Domestic Policy Council. There's a chief of staff. At some point, we need to know who would be the most likely person he talked to about that.

JEAN-PIERRE: I think what I'm trying to say is that there are so many issues that come up, that is presented to the President —

O'DONNELL: Sure.

JEAN-PIERRE: — as you know, we have covered many administrations, and there are just regular channels that — that happen — that go to the president.

O'DONNELL: But it looks like it's evasive to not have the most senior people in the White House willing to say, I had a conversation with the President about it, or I had — or we talked about it in this context, or that context. And we're also all reporting on the consumer side of it of what you're doing, putting out and trying to get information. But we're also trying to understand the information flow of this White House and it's important for us to get that answer, which is why we're keep asking it until we get that answer.

JEAN-PIERRE: No. No, you have every right to keep asking, that's why I'm here. Look, really, Kelly O, he's briefed on countless priorities. The is the President of the United States. There are regular channels, he is briefed by his senior White House staff, and that is just the process that we have.

O'DONNELL: So, who would it be? The chief of staff?

JEAN-PIERRE: I'm — I'm not going to confirm who it was, I'm just letting you know that there are regular channels that we use. And you know, it's senior — again, it's senior White House staff that elevate issues to him, when the time comes. And there are regular channels and that's — that's what I have for you to share. [TO DOOCY] Go ahead.

PETER DOOCY: Thanks, Karine.

JEAN-PIERRE: Yep.

DOOCY: If the President thinks that Congress must act immediately to end this epidemic of gun violence, is he going to bring the key players from Capitol Hill to the beach with him tonight?

JEAN-PIERRE: Oh, okay, so, I don't have —

DOOCY: Isn't that a big part of candidate Biden's whole thing that he knows how to get things done in Congress?

JEAN-PIERRE: He does. He does. I mean, he's — he's beaten the gun lobby before. He has.

DOOCY: Then why not invite these lawmakers who haven't —

JEAN-PIERRE: But it's not —

DOOCY: — beaten the gun lobby —

JEAN-PIERRE: — but it's not —

DOOCY: — and say this is how it's done?

JEAN-PIERRE: — but it's not his thing. It's actually fact. We saw that he did that in the senate during his Congress days, that he beat the gun lobby.

DOOCY: Look, I'm agreeing with you —

JEAN-PIERRE: Oh.

DOOCY: — that he has a lot of legislative experience. I'm asking why it is that you can say he wants give these negotiations —

JEAN-PIERRE: Do you want to go to the beach with the President tonight? Is that what you're trying to tell me?

DOOCY: I would — I would love to, but the weather's not great.

JEAN-PIERRE: Look, I don't — well, touche on that. The weather — it's pouring outside, like cats and dogs. It is not great.

DOOCY: But if —

JEAN-PIERRE: No.

DOOCY: — if people are dying every day, then why —

JEAN-PIERRE: Absolutely.

DOOCY: — is the President saying that he wants to give it some space and let somebody else —

JEAN-PIERRE: But you're going to hear from the President tonight and it's not that he — you know, it's not that he hasn't been involved. He has been involved. I just listed at all of the conversations — not the conversations, but speeches that he's made. I just listed out the executive actions that he has taken, but I want to make sure that, you know — that it is very clear, that the President has indeed taken action. He cannot do it alone, so he's asking for Congress to act. The American public is going to hear from him tonight, I don't have any — I don't have any meetings to — to preview, or to lay out for him, I'm not telling you that it's not going to happen. I'm just saying I don't have anything to preview for you today.

DOOCY: And I get not — you don't want to preview anything —

JEAN-PIERRE: Yep.

DOOCY: — that's in the text tonight, but what law could anybody — President or anybody else — propose that would guarantee that somebody who really wants to get their hands on a gun can't?

JEAN-PIERRE: Well, they're having negotiations right now to talk through what the options are. Look, I mentioned the red flag, right — red flag laws. If — if enacted — if enacted, that actually, we have seen across the country in different states, where it has been helpful. Look, we are — we are going to give them some space to see when they come up with, the President — the most important thing here is that the President wants Congress to take action and to act.

DOOCY: But — okay. You got Chicago, for example. They already have plenty of very strict gun laws, some of the strictest in the country. 47 people shot there over the Memorial Day weekend, nine of them died, so which law would have prevented any of that?

JEAN-PIERRE: Alright. Well —

DOOCY: Do we think that all these people in Chicago who are shooting each other are legally buying their guns?

JEAN-PIERRE: — so, here's — here's a couple of examples for you. I was just talking about the red flags laws. There are some examples here of how they prevented tragedies. In California, a study showed that a California red flag law has assisted in the prevention of 21 mass shootings between 2016 and 2018. Florida, since passing a red flag law in 2018, there have been notable cases of few — of the law intervening in multiple cases of potential violence — of potential violence. In Connecticut, and Indiana, for every 10 to 20 preventions under the red flag laws, there was one fewer deaths than there would otherwise have been expected. So, when enacted, it does help. There are things that we can do, and one of the things that the President talks about expanding — expanding the background checks, if we're able to do that, we are going to take more guns out of the hands of criminals. And that is incredibly important. So, there are things here that can be worked out, that can be done, that is not going to prevent every tragedy, but can take us to a better place, so we can protect our families.

DOOCY: Okay. And then my last one would be. You guys at the White House had some very hard headlines this week about inflation and about baby formula. If there's nothing new that you can point to in this speech tonight, did you just schedule it to get people talking about something else?

JEAN-PIERRE: People have died, people have died in the past couple weeks in particular. We had 19 kids die in Uvalde just recently of a — of a mass shooter that came into the classroom and killed them plus the teachers. We had people doing everything on a Saturday, like some of us do, go to the grocery store, and ten of them were murdered. Just last night in Tulsa, we're learning of people who were, again, killed, so this is not about politics. This not about partisan politics here. This is something that he has worked on since he was a senator. This is very important and real for the President, and for the grieving families that he has met with, sadly in the last couple of weeks. So, this is an opportunity again to call for action, to get Congress to move. And, you know, it is — it is disheartening to hear that this could potentially, or if I am hearing this, right could be used as a political tool and that's not with this is. This is not about partisan politics, this is about people's lives.

(....)

3:53:36 p.m.

5 minutes and 40 seconds

ED O'KEEFE: To follow up on what Kelly was asking about regarding the baby formula shortage, you were asked earlier by a few people, I just want to ask this again, with all due respect.

JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah.

O'KEEFE: Were you able to speak with the President about when he was informed in April?

JEAN-PIERRE: I — here — he talked about it himself, he said he was informed in April, so I don't — I don't think I need to — the President mention that. He said that, so I don't need to clear that up. You heard directly from the President on that.

O'KEEFE: Well, part of the reason we — I asked it, at least is you talked yesterday about February 17th, and February 18th, and what we are trying to figure out is when exactly in April was he told? Was it April 1? Was it April 30? Was it April 15? Somewhere else?

JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have a date to share with you. What I can tell you is he spoke to this yesterday, and he said that it was in April. So, that — that matters.

O'KEEFE: Take it down — take it down a level from him —

JEAN-PIERRE: Okay, yeah, yeah.

O'KEEFE: — into the staff of the White House because part of the reason that there is so much curiosity about this across town is because, as you know, there have been stories written over the last several days and weeks about how things are going here in the West Wing, how things are operating. And so, when we ask who was told, either by the FDA, or the Department of Health and human services, or the USADA, here in the West Wing, who was told first? How did that get from that person eventually to the President? It is completely understandable. There are thousands of things going on across the federal government today.

JEAN-PIERRE: There are. There are thousands of things.

O'KEEFE: But here's the issue.

JEAN-PIERRE: We were just talking about gun violence.

O'KEEFE: Something else could crop up suddenly as an unforeseen crisis, like this one. And so, we're trying to get a sense of how things operate here inside the West Wing and how they eventually rise to the level of presidential involvement that then lead to things like evoking the

Defense Protection Act five — four, five months after the initial flags were raised.

JEAN-PIERRE: So, Ed, the President briefs through his regular channels. As he is briefed on countless priorities that the President of the United States has to deal with. There are countless issues, countless priorities that I talk about here all the time, every day, about different priorities that we have to deal with, whether it's the economy, whether it's COVID, whether it's climate change, whether it's foreign policy issues that we have to deal with and assess, that is how we run the White House. That's how any White House is run, so there are regular channels of — of White House senior staff and that's how it gets elevated. You're asking me for a specific name, I am telling you how the process works and I'm telling you how it goes from White House staff to regular channels to the president.

O'KEEFE: Part of why this is intriguing is because we know from what you've said, of what your colleagues have told us, and what we've learned in our reporting over the last year and a half, is that he's a voracious consumer of information from across the federal government, and whenever he gets briefed on something like this, he asks a lot of questions. And he usually puts it to the staff to come back to him with solutions or some answers to these questions. So the idea that he was told about this in April and then it didn't get elevated until mid-May, when Congress and the press started raising bigger questions about this, begs the question of, well then, what happened in April when this very curious, very detail-oriented President in briefings would have been told about it and when steps are taken that are now underway. That's part of why it's so intriguing and curious about this situation and why we're so desperate for information because normally in these situations, we're told, "oh, well, here's what he wanted to know and here's who he tasked with doing it. And we're not getting it this time.

JEAN-PIERRE: No, I — look, we have laid out timelines over and over again.

O'KEEFE: No, but you gave us two dates and then tell us generally in April he was told about this.

JEAN-PIERRE: Okay, so, by late — let me try again. Let's — let's try this again. By late — by late in April, sales were going down and shortages were appearing. So, that is what we learned in late April. And since then, through May, across the administration, we have aggressively invoked the DPA and used it three times — as you just mentioned — and that is because of the President's leadership, launched Operation Fly Formula, again, because of the President's leadership, secured 80 million safe infant formula bottles from other countries and cut red tape and issued WIC waivers in all 50 states because that's what happened in April that triggered our — our involvement in the way that we did throughout May in doing these for very specific things. Look, USDA, you know, they took immediate action, but USDA and FDA cut red tape and increased supply. A reminder there is more supply on the market after the recall than prior. That did not happen — that didn't happen by accident. So, these actions were designed to bridge demand while Abbott worked through its supply — safely — safely opening manufactured products that met FDA's gold standard. So, they were acting, at USDA, FDA, were acting from the moment that the recall happened. But, again, the sales were going down and shortages were appearing in late April. And that's when —

O'KEEFE: That's when he was told?

JEAN-PIERER: Well, he said in late April, right? And this is —

REPORTERS: He said April.

O'KEEFE: He said April.

JEAN-PIERRE: — in April — I'm sorry, in April. Okay, he said in April, in early April, the point that I'm making is, what we started to see in April were sales were going down and shortages were appearing. And when that happened, we triggered, we — the President made sure that the DPA happened, the Operation Fly Formula happened and that was what — that was our focus there. And we wanted to make sure we got as much supply as possible because again, we saw the sales were going down.