

US belatedly hits Biden's COVID vaccination goal as hospitalizations soar

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The United States on Monday hit President Joe Biden's goal of administering at least one dose of a COVID vaccine to 70 percent of adults almost a month late, as the newest wave of infections pushed

hospitalizations to levels seen last summer.

Biden's administration had initially targeted Independence Day on July 4 to reach the goal and declare victory over the worst of the pandemic.

But falling vaccination rates, particularly in politically conservative regions in the South and Midwest, and among younger people, those with lower income and racial minorities, meant the objective was missed.

While 60.6 percent of eligible adults and 49.7 percent of the total population are now fully vaccinated, the United States has fallen behind its northern neighbor Canada, which started its immunization campaign later but has now fully vaccinated 59 percent of its people.

It comes as America was being battered by a new wave driven by the hyper-contagious Delta variant, which has sent national daily cases soaring to beyond 70,000, according to data that excludes unreliable weekend numbers.

Across the country, hospitals were seeing on average more than 6,200 daily COVID admissions, while more than 300 people are dying every day.

"These cases are concentrated in communities with lower vaccination rates," Jeff Zients, White House COVID task force coordinator, told reporters.

"One in three cases nationwide occurred in Florida and Texas this past week," he added.

In a silver lining, states that lagged behind in their vaccination rates are now beginning to catch up, according to the latest data.

The eight states with the highest current case rates have seen an average increase of 171 percent in their daily vaccination rate compared to three weeks ago, said Zients.

These include Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas.

Momentum was also picking up for vaccine mandates in the private sector, with Disney and Walmart implementing new requirements and incentives for employees.

Last week, Biden's administration announced federal workers would need to either get vaccinated or submit to regular tests, following similar steps by California and New York.

Vaccines holding up

While Delta poses the strongest threat yet to vaccine protection, the current generation of shots were continuing to keep the vast majority of vaccinated people out of hospital and alive.

According to cumulative data reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) by July 24, vaccination resulted in an eight-fold reduction in disease incidence and 25-fold reduction in hospitalizations and deaths.

In the state of Tennessee, over the month of July, 97 percent of all COVID hospitalizations and 98 percent of deaths were among unvaccinated people, data showed.

Breakthrough infections, meanwhile, remain uncommon, but when they do happen, preliminary research suggests there is an increased risk of onward transmission of the Delta variant compared to past strains.

With this in mind, the CDC last week reinstated guidance for fully vaccinated people to wear masks indoors in areas considered high-risk, which is now 79 percent of all the country's counties.

Eight counties in the Bay Area of San Francisco issued mask mandates Monday, as did Louisiana.

"It has been clear that current recommendations on their own haven't worked," said John Bel Edwards, Louisiana's Democratic governor, adding he was responding to requests by hospitals and health care providers.

Federal health authorities are also debating whether a third dose may be required for certain groups such as the immunocompromised, following a similar move by Israel.

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