

Experts demand that Biden do more to distribute COVID vaccines globally

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(HealthDay)—More than 175 public health experts, scientists and

activists on Tuesday called for President Joe Biden to do more to help fight the global spread of the coronavirus, warning that newer, more dangerous variants are likely to emerge if nothing is done.

"We urge you to act now," the experts wrote in a [joint letter](#) to senior White House officials Tuesday, the *Washington Post* reported.

"Announcing within the next 30 days an ambitious global vaccine manufacturing program is the only way to control this pandemic, protect the precious gains made to date, and build vaccine infrastructure for the future."

A separate letter was sent directly to Biden that noted the Delta variant is fueling a surge of infections in Africa, Latin America and Asia, where many residents have yet to receive a single dose, the *Post* reported. Meanwhile, the United States has stockpiled more than 55 million doses of mRNA vaccines but is administering fewer than 900,000 shots per day, the letter said.

"At this rate, it would take over two months to administer just the vaccine doses currently stored," the authors added.

The letters' co-signers include Tom Frieden, who led the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during the Obama administration; Linda Fried, the dean of Columbia University's public health school; Paul Farmer, co-founder of Partners in Health, a nonprofit group focused on the [developing world](#); and other leaders in global health and infectious disease. More than 50 organizations also co-signed the letter.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment from the *Post*.

Several signers said they have personally appealed to senior Biden administration officials, including Dr. Anthony Fauci and top pandemic

adviser David Kessler, but were now frustrated with the slow pace of movement on global vaccinations. Fewer than 4 percent of Africans and about 30 percent of Asians have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, compared with nearly 60 percent of Americans, according to the University of Oxford's Our World in Data project.

"We've been pushing Fauci and Kessler hard on this for months, and they, in turn, have been pushing those above them. But the world has nothing to show for it," said Peter Staley, a co-founder of PrEP4All Collaboration, an HIV/AIDS advocacy organization that has pivoted to coronavirus activism.

"Pharma took years before letting the rest of the world access their AIDS drugs," he told the *Post*. "We won't let that happen with COVID vaccines."

The Biden administration has defended its global response, with officials announcing last week that the United States has sent more than 110 million doses of vaccine to dozens of nations. The United States also plans to share 500 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine with nearly 100 low- and middle-income nations, the *Post* reported.

But activists say Biden needs to do more. Some of their frustration has been focused on Moderna, a company that they say has received more than \$1.3 billion in federal funding for its vaccine but has done too little to share its expertise with others.

"This administration has been playing footsies with Moderna instead of leading on this issue," Staley added. "Do you think Roosevelt asked Henry Ford if he could start building tanks, but only on the company's timetable?"

A spokesperson for Moderna did not immediately respond to a request

for comment.

The experts demanded that the administration be able to produce 8 billion doses annually of mRNA vaccines by the end of the year, exporting at least 40 million doses per month and helping set up vaccine manufacturing hubs around the globe.

"People are really frantic right now," Yale University public health researcher Gregg Gonsalves, who co-signed the letter, told the *Post*. "I think you're going to see an escalation from our side over the next few weeks. No one seems to have gotten the message that the world is burning—and the status quo is unacceptable."

Members of military must get COVID shots by mid-September

All members of the U.S. military must get a COVID-19 vaccine by mid-September, the Pentagon announced this week.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin noted that the deadline could be moved up if the vaccine receives final approval sooner from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration or if infection rates continue to rise.

"I will seek the president's approval to make the vaccines mandatory no later than mid-September, or immediately upon" full FDA approval, "whichever comes first," Austin said in his [memo](#), which was released on Twitter.

The Pentagon plan gives the FDA time to give final approval to the Pfizer vaccine, which is expected to come early next month. Without that formal approval, Austin needs a waiver from Biden to make the shots mandatory, but Biden has made it clear that he supports the move.

In a [statement](#) released on Monday, Biden said he strongly supports Austin's plan to add the COVID vaccine "to the list of required vaccinations for our service members not later than mid-September."

"Being vaccinated will enable our service members to stay healthy, to better protect their families, and to ensure that our force is ready to operate anywhere in the world," Biden added.

Austin's decision mirrors moves made recently by governments and companies around the country, as the highly contagious Delta variant drives new U.S. cases, hospitalizations and deaths to heights not seen since last winter, the *Associated Press* reported. In the military, where service members live and work closely together in barracks and on ships, concerns about rapid spread of the virus are especially high because any large outbreak in the military could lessen America's ability to defend itself in a security crisis.

Austin stressed that if infection rates rise and threaten military readiness, "I will not hesitate to act sooner or recommend a different course to the President if I feel the need to do so. To defend this Nation, we need a healthy and ready force."

The military services will have the next few weeks to prepare, determine how many vaccines they need, and how this mandate will be implemented, the *AP* reported.

The decision will add the COVID-19 vaccine to a list of other shots that service members are already required to get. Depending on their location, service members can get as many as 17 different vaccines, the *AP* said.

Austin's memo also said that in the meantime, the Pentagon will comply with Biden's order for additional restrictions on unvaccinated federal

personnel, including masks, social distancing and travel limits.

According to the Pentagon, more than 1 million troops are fully vaccinated and another 237,000 have received one shot, the *AP* reported. But the different military branches vary widely in their vaccination rates.

The Navy said that more than 74% of all active duty and reserve sailors have been vaccinated with at least one shot. The Air Force reports that more than 65% of its active duty and 60% of reserve forces are at least partially vaccinated, and the number for the Army appears closer to 50%, the *AP* reported.

Service members can seek an exemption from any vaccine—either temporary or permanent—for a variety of reasons including health issues or religious beliefs. Regulations say, for example, that anyone who had a severe adverse reaction to the [vaccine](#) can be exempt, and those who are pregnant or have other conditions can postpone a shot, the *AP* reported.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [COVID-19](#).

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