

Biden outlines COVID plans, says it's time to return to work

March 2 2022, by Zeke Miller



White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients removes a face mask as he prepares to speak at a press briefing at the White House in Washington, April 13, 2021. The White House said Wednesday, Feb. 9, 2022, that it was beginning to prepare for the next phase of the pandemic response amid growing impatience for the federal government to ease up. Zients said officials have started consultations in recent weeks with state and local leaders and public health officials "on steps we should be taking to keep the country moving forward." Credit: AP Photo/Patrick Semansky, File

President Joe Biden declared Tuesday that "it's time for Americans to get back to work" as he announced new efforts to allow people to return to normal activities safely after two years of pandemic disruptions.

Biden used his State of the Union address to announce that his administration was launching a "test-to-treat" initiative to provide free antiviral pills at pharmacies to those who test positive for the virus.

He also highlighted the progress made on the pandemic since last year, with a dramatic reduction in cases, readily-available vaccines and tests, and new therapeutics soon becoming more accessible.

"Tonight, I can say we are moving forward safely, back to more normal routines," Biden said. "It's time for Americans to get back to work and fill our great downtowns again."

His comments come ahead of the White House release of a new "National COVID-19 Preparedness Plan" on Wednesday. The White House said it would be "a roadmap that will enable us to move forward safely, and sustain and build on the progress we've made over the past 13 months."

In his remarks Tuesday, Biden said that in addition to starting the new antiviral initiative, his administration would allow people in the U.S. to order another round of free tests from the government.

An antiviral pill from Pfizer has been shown to reduce the risk of hospitalization from COVID-19 by 90%. By the end of the month, the administration says, 1 million pills will be available, with double that ready for use in April.

A White House official said the "test-to-treat" plan will initially roll out in hundreds of pharmacies across the country, including CVS, Walgreens, and Kroger locations. Those who test positive at the sites will be able to obtain the antiviral pills on the spot for immediate use.



President Joe Biden speaks at an event to celebrate Black History Month in the East Room of the White House, Monday, Feb. 28, 2022, in Washington. Credit: AP Photo/Patrick Semansky

Biden said that starting next week, the administration would make available four more free tests to U.S. households through COVIDTests.gov, which has sent more than 270 million free tests to nearly 70 million households since it launched in mid-January.

COVID-19 cases have fallen to their lowest level since last summer in recent weeks, after a winter spike from the highly-transmissible omicron variant. Deaths, though, which lag cases by weeks, are still elevated, with an average of nearly 1,700 people dying in the U.S. each day. U.S. officials emphasize that most instances of serious illnesses and death in the U.S. occur among those who are unvaccinated or who have not received a booster dose of the vaccines.

Earlier Tuesday, Biden extended the [federal government's](#) 100% reimbursement of COVID-19 emergency response costs to states, tribes and territories through July 1, the White House announced Tuesday.

White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients informed governors on a conference call that Biden is approving the extension of Federal Emergency Management Agency support to help continue FEMA-backed efforts like vaccination clinics, mass testing sites and surging hospital resources to deal with local case spikes.

"FEMA's priority throughout the response to COVID-19 has been to coordinate and provide the necessary resources and personnel states, tribes and territories need to adequately respond to the pandemic," FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell said. "Today's extension of the 100% cost-share through July 1, 2022, builds on our efforts to assist impacted communities across state and federal levels."

The extension through the first half of the year is a sign that the White House continues to see a need for federal resources in combating COVID-19 even as Biden tries to guide the country to live with the coronavirus while case counts recede.

Recent examples of FEMA funding include \$1.2 million given to Ball State University in Indiana last month to cover on-campus testing and \$91.8 million to Wisconsin to reimburse for COVID-19 testing costs and

surge staffing in treatment centers.

Biden, a Democrat, first signed an order directing FEMA to cover 100% of state emergency costs related to the coronavirus on his second day in office through September 2021. He subsequently extended it to the end of 2021 and again through April 1.

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