



PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT
Delivered by the Minister of Health & Wellness
Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton, MP,
Tuesday, December 8, 2020 at 2:00 PM

Madam Speaker, I rise to bring this Honourable House an update on vaccination as an essential component of the National COVID-19 Response. With more than 66 million people globally having become infected by the virus and more than 1.5 million having lost their lives, vaccination as a response to containing the disease cannot be overlooked.

Here in Jamaica, Madam Speaker, with more than 11,000 infections and 265 deaths, vaccination must form a part of our COVID-19 response efforts.

That being said, Madam Speaker, the issue of a COVID-19 vaccine, we know, has been a source of anxiety for some as we continue to navigate the new normal imposed by the pandemic.

My goal today is, therefore, to clarify for the Members of this Honourable House and the Jamaican public the approach of the Ministry of Health and Wellness and the Government of Jamaica to the inclusion of vaccination in the National Public Health Response to a virus that has been a levithian of a challenge – not only for Jamaica but also for countries the world over.

THE COMMISSION

Madam Speaker, the first order of business has been to name a National COVID-19 Vaccine Commission, which is comprised of a multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder group of persons. They include representatives from the



Ministry of Health and Wellness, the National Health Fund, the Ministry of Finance and the Public Service, the Medical Association of Jamaica, the Nurses Association of Jamaica, the Jamaica Medical Doctors Association, the University of the West Indies, the Jamaica Council of Churches, the Private Sector Organisation of Jamaica, and the Jamaica Defence Force. **Madam Speaker, that Commission has been named and we had, earlier this morning, our first meeting.**

The responsibilities of the Commission, Madam Speaker, include to:

- Provide guidance and oversight in the development of a National COVID-19 Deployment and Vaccination Plan for the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines;
- Provide oversight in the designing of strategies for the deployment, implementation and monitoring of a COVID-19 vaccine(s) in Jamaica;
- Provide guidance in ensuring that the plan and related financing is well aligned to other national COVID-19 recovery and response and support plans, and that implementation is fully integrated and coordinated;
- Guide the establishment of an operations process for coordination, information and communication;
- Provide guidance in the design and implementation of a public education campaign; and
- Support the implementation of health services readiness and capacity assessments to identify bottlenecks and guide delivery of vaccines and other essential supplies.

Among other things, Madam Speaker, the Commission is also to the extent possible, facilitate cooperation at policy, technical and local levels between government, non-governmental, private sector agencies or organisation and civil society in the process of the plan's development and implementation.



CURRENT SITUATION

Madam Speaker, Jamaicans can be assured that we are procuring vaccines through the COVID-19 facility Global Access Facility (COVAX Facility) that is a collaboration with the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI) and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI). Jamaica is among the CARICOM member states on whose behalf a down payment has been made by the Caribbean Public Health Agency for equitable access to a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine.

It is important to note, Madam Speaker, that the COVAX Facility continually monitors the COVID-19 vaccine landscape, identifies the most suitable vaccine candidates based on scientific merit and scalability while seeking to build a diversified portfolio across different technologies, geographies and vaccine characteristics.

As at December 2, there were some 51 candidate vaccines in clinical evaluation, 11 of which are in phase three trials. There are 163 candidate vaccines in pre-clinical evaluation. At this time, the vaccine being administered in other jurisdictions is NOT part of the COVAX facility but there are three other vaccine candidates that are in the final phases of development and approval.

Madam Speaker, the expectation is that in the first instance, Jamaica will vaccinate 16 per cent of our population. With the goal to protect public health and minimise societal and economic impact by reducing COVID-19 mortality, the intention is to prioritise the vaccination of our health workers who are at very high risk of acquiring and transmitting infection and our older adults who



we understand are among the most vulnerable to adverse outcomes and death associated with COVID-19 infection.

NEXT STEPS

In addition to the naming of the National Vaccine Commission, we are even now elaborating the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan for consideration by the Commission. Elements of that plan include:

- the management structure;
- a review of the legal framework;
- demand generation and communication;
- training;
- vaccine cold chain and logistics;
- safety surveillance; and
- information systems.

Madam Speaker, once finalised, the plan will be shared with the members of this Honourable House and the people of Jamaica in whose best interest we are operating as we seek to secure for them the best possible health outcomes from COVID-19.

COVID UPDATE

Madam Speaker, I pause here to provide an important update on our COVID-19 numbers. Based on the surveillance of the National Epidemiological Team, the Ministry of Health and Wellness has begun to see a very worrying trend in the western half of the island and in particular in Westmoreland. In this parish, over the last month, the number of confirmed cases have moved from 245 to 460. In the last two weeks, over 100 new confirmed cases have been recorded.



When we look at the deaths, Madam Speaker, within Westmoreland alone, we have had 22 deaths overall – 12 of those recorded in the last two weeks. Our surveillance at the hospital that serves the parish also shows a worrying trend, with COVID admissions have been increasing steadily over the last three months. For October, there were 23 admissions and for November, there were 55 admissions. That is a 100 per cent increase in admissions in one month.

Westmoreland, we summarize is demonstrating community spread that has the potential to increase further over the December to January period. We are seeing an increase in cases, an increase in hospitalizations and an increase in deaths.

In response to the data, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Health & Wellness, through the Western Regional Health Authority and the Parish Health Department, has utilized several modalities to increase awareness and to stimulate behavior changes. These include Public awareness and testing in the transport centres, the town centres, churches, health facilities, schools, workplaces, markets and in the business district. We have made three community interventions over the last two weeks. In Savanna-la-Mar, 104 persons were tested, with 13 found positive. In Little London, 102 persons were tested, 19 of whom returned positive results. In Grange Hill, 100 persons were tested, 16 of whom were found to be positive. This gives us an average positivity rate of 15 per cent.

Madam Speaker, when we examine the surveillance map for the parish, almost 80 per cent of all communities are showing active cases, with persons showing varying degrees of severity of illness – from asymptomatic to requiring transfer to the intensive care units of the Cornwall Regional Hospital and the University Hospital of the West Indies.



These cases are being triggered by careless behavior and lack of adherence infection prevention and control measures. The young persons within these communities are actively engaging in social intercatations, exposing themselves to the virus and taking it home to their older relatives who are becoming ill and are dying.

Based on the on-the-ground information provided by the police and the local health team, most of the infections are driven by illegal parties hosted at bars and corner shops, nine nights and wakes, and the infamous bike parties that move from community to community. This indiscipline threatens all of our efforts and could ultimately erode the gains we have made over the last several months to contain the spread and reduce our rate of infection.

This situation, Madam Speaker, is a clear and present danger to the efforts of the Ministry of Health and Wellness and indeed the entire country to not only flatten the curve but also to ensure that we are able to prevent the overwhelming of the public health system.

As you are also aware – and as I have said on this very floor – we are in high gear in terms of our preparedness for an expected surge in COVID-19 cases later this month and into the New Year. However, the situation in Westmoreland has moved faster than anticipated and must be cauterized now before we start to see an exponential increase that will certainly overwhelm the health system. The other parishes in the north western side of the island are also seeing increase numbers and there is a need for vigilance from all members of the population to safeguard themselves and thise around them.



Madam Speaker, after careful deliberation with my Cabinet colleagues and dialogue with the technical team in the Ministry, I am directed by the Prime Minister, the Most Honourable Andrew Holness, to give due warning to the people of Westmoreland: This behaviour WILL NOT be tolerated. If the present measures are not adhered to and we do not see a change in the trajectory over the next few days, then new restrictions will be imposed on the parish to effect the change. We will use every tool at our disposal to ensure that the work of the health team – those nurses, doctors, public health inspectors, community health aides, contact investigators, porters, and medical technologists – is not undermined or brought to futility. To be fore-warned is to be fore-armed.

Wear your mask. Maintain the physical distance of six feet. Wash and sanitise your hands. Additionally, we encourage everyone to obey the law. Do not encourage any gathering over 15 persons. Ensure that you maintain the curfew. And endeavour to tan ah yuh yaad!

Madam Speaker, as a health team, we will be engaging the communities of Westmoreland in a further series of activities. We will make interventions at the Negril Bus Park, in Savanna-la-Mar and Petersfield and we will again try to encourage all persons in the parish to adhere to the protocols.

Madam Speaker, Christmas is a time of merriment and good cheer. It is a time of giving and of love. All of these things can be achieved within the new normal, understanding that the greatest gift we can give is the gift of good health.

I thank you.

Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton, MP
Minister of Health & Wellness