



Parliamentary Statement of the Minister of Health and Wellness
Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton, MP
Re: Update on COVID-19 and the move towards Vaccine Deployment
Gordon House, Kingston
Tuesday, January 12, 2021

Madam Speaker, since March of 2020, Jamaica has been on a long sojourn through many aspects of the COVID-19 Pandemic. We started with our first case, our walk through the tumultuous period of the spike in August and our ultimate declaration of community transmission in September. We have had to also strengthen our efforts to curtail the spread of infection and the many challenges related to the balancing of the public health prerequisites and the socio-economic imperatives of everyday life.

In Country Status

Today Madam Speaker, I can report that as at January 11, 2021, Jamaica has recorded 13,760 cases, 123 being reported in the 24 hours. We have also recorded, with sadness, the passing of 315 persons, with two of these deaths being recorded in the 24 hours.

The country, Madam Speaker, continues to face the threat of COVID-19 and we continue to see spread of the virus within the population. The results of our efforts at curtailing the spread of the virus especially over the Christmas and New Year's celebrations is still being assessed. We still continue our rigorous surveillance of communities and special settings such as homes



for the elderly and infirmaries, to ensure early detection and mitigation. The Government is still seized with the realities of hospital management and continues to use every measure within our tool box to ensure that our health system does not become overwhelmed.

While we are still in the midst of the pandemic, indications are pointing to some success in the management of the spread of the disease and its impact on the health system. We have, through the strong support of the healthcare workers on the ground, not seen the buckling of the health system under the pressures of COVID-19. We have also maintained, over time, infection rates below 2.5 per 100,000 as well as positivity rates of between 8 and 10%.

When compared with international benchmarks, Jamaica can be said to be one of the countries that have been able to manage well the risks that are associated with the pandemic.

Review of Interventions in Westmoreland

Madam Speaker, last month we highlighted the risks associated with cases in Westmoreland. Based on our assessment, it was determined that State interventions were necessary to curtail the spread of the virus in the parish. Today, I can report that the interventions have resulted in the reduction in reported cases to 51 active cases as at January 11, 2021. The total occupancy at the Savanna-la-Mar Hospital is now 56% for isolation, a significant reduction from the above 80% isolation occupancy reported in December.



As such the Ministry of Health and Wellness has indicated to the Cabinet that we will not require an extension of the special restrictions for that parish beyond the current time period. We thank the citizens of the parish especially their elected officials, for their support and cooperation and advise that only through your maintenance of the protocols can we maintain and further reduce the spread of the disease.

Concern for St. Ann and Manchester

Madam Speaker, there are however worrying signs on the horizon. As part of our proactive approach, we have always looked at the numbers, work through the science, and implemented remedial actions when required. Based on our current assessments, the Parishes of St. Ann and Manchester are showing signs of uncontrolled spread. As at January 11, 2021, St Ann has 75 active cases while Manchester has 68 active cases. When assessed by population, St. Ann has 35 per 100,000 while Manchester has 43 per 100,000. This is the first and second highest rates in the island.

The Heath Departments in those parishes have already began to ramp up prevention activities with testing and contact tracing, especially for the vulnerable population. Community interventions, which are key components of the response, have also been initiated with



activities in town centres and in at-risk communities. It is at this time that we say to the citizens of these parishes that you can reduce the spread of disease through your actions. Pay close attention to the Infection Prevention and Control Protocols, wear your masks, keep physically distant, stay away from large crowds and wash your hands or sanitize as often as possible.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry will continue to monitor the situation in these parishes and advise on any further actions that may be required as we seek to protect the population, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Global Vaccination Plans

Madam Speaker, non-pharmaceutical interventions are crucial to slowing down spread, however, they are not able to control the pandemic sustainably. The development and swift global deployment of safe and effective vaccines against COVID-19 is essential to containing the global pandemic. Since December 2020, several countries have initiated their COVID-19 Vaccination plans. These countries to a large extent have invested heavily in research and development and have committed large amount of resources in purchasing vaccines for their populations.



Currently, countries through emergency approval processes, have procured and distributed vaccines to their populations with the hope of:

- Protecting the integrity of the healthcare system and infrastructure for the continuity of essential services;
- Reducing severe morbidity and mortality associated with COVID-19 by protecting populations at greatest risk; and
- Reducing transmission of infection in the community and generating herd immunity

These universal goals of vaccination are essential to the global march towards returning world economies to normalcy and ushering an end to the pandemic and the road to economic and social recovery.

Vaccines Availability

As at January 9, 2021, there are 43 vaccines that are being developed right across the world that are in Phase 1 Trials. Twenty are in Phase 2 and another 20 are in Phase 3 Trials. Seven vaccines are in early or limited use in countries and 3 are fully approved for use. The three (3) that are approved are:

- Pfizer-BioNTech with development in the United States and Germany
- Moderna with development in the United States



- Oxford-Astrazeneca with development in the United Kingdom and Sweden

Madam Speaker, other vaccine developers in other countries are at different stages of the development process and it is anticipated that within the coming weeks more vaccines will be approved and ready for distribution in the market. Of note are developments in the following countries:

- China has 4 vaccines that are near approval stage, some that have been approved in their home country for emergency use in their populations;
- India has 2 vaccines that are at the last stages of approval; and
- Cuba has 4 vaccines, 1 of which is at Phase 3 trials

Jamaica apart of the COVAX Facility

Madam Speaker, the Jamaican Government, as has many developing countries, joined the COVAX Facility as part of our strategic approach to access safe vaccines for our people. This collaboration is to:

- Strengthen our capacity to ensure quality standards
- Leverage economies of scale for better prices, and
- Enhance technical assistance to support cold chain management and distribution



As I have announced in this Parliament, through the Facility we have been able to negotiate vaccine dosages prices of US\$10.55 reduced from the going average price of US\$35.00. This price is negotiated for 16% of the population and represents Phase 1 of Jamaica's vaccination roll-out plan.

Additionally, I can announce Madam Speaker, that further to my update in November, the Ministry has been advised by the COVAX Facility that the first batch of vaccines that are due in April 2021, has been increased from an original 1% to 5%. A total of approximately 292,000 doses enough to vaccinate approximately 146,000 Jamaicans.

Within this first phase of the programme priority will be given to the following groups of individuals:

- Healthcare personnel
- Elderly 60 years and older
- JDF
- JCF
- JFB (Jamaica Fire Brigade)
- DCS (Department of Correctional Services)
- PICA



- Infirmaries
- Members of Parliament, Senators, Parish Council representatives and other senior members of the State
- Residents and staff of Nursing Homes
- Institutionalized Individuals (persons in the penal institutions)

This represents approximately 440,000 individuals.

Madam Speaker, the vaccination of the elderly and frontline workers who are most at risk is crucial to the overall efficacy of the programme. Through vaccination of the elderly, we will immediately cauterize the number of persons who have negative outcomes due to an infection of COVID-19 and by vaccinating our front line workers, greater levels of service delivery can be realized through the reduction of their risk profile based on infection.

Safe Vaccines outside of the COVAX Facility

Madam Speaker, based on the pace of development and the need to safeguard the population, the Government, through Cabinet, has also agreed to begin to explore Jamaica's access to safe vaccines outside of the COVAX facility. Additionally, agreement has been made to explore bi-lateral arrangements with countries that have indicated their willingness to partner with Jamaica to ensure the safe vaccination of our population. Accordingly, the



Ministry of Health and Wellness in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade will begin the process of exploring how we can leverage our international engagements to secure additional supply access for safe vaccines.

Going forward, the Government will now enter bi-lateral meetings with States to include India, China and Cuba, to ascertain their level of support and to determine the best arrangement for acquisition and distribution of safe vaccines to the population.

It must be understood that the Ministry of Health and Wellness will maintain its very rigorous process of review for all medical supplies that administered within our jurisdiction. Therefore, the Standards and Regulations Division of the Ministry in collaboration with the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) will be maintaining the requirements for the Emergency Use Authorization for the vaccines. For the granting of Emergency Use Authorization, the vaccine must meet one of the following criteria:

1. Be included in the World Health Organization's Emergency Use Listing (EUL) for prevention of SARS-CoV-2 infection (COVID-19); or
2. Be granted authorization for emergency use for prevention of COVID-19 by one of the following stringent national regulatory authorities (SNRA) of reference:



- US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- Health Canada
- European Medicines Agency

The vaccine can only be used for the period of authorization.

Change in the Travel Procedures

Finally, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Wellness takes note of the issues that have arisen due to the change in the travel procedures for persons returning or travelling to Canada and the United Kingdom. Effective on January 6, 2021, persons travelling to Canada will be required to submit a negative PCR test 96 hours before landing. These new restrictions have posed significant challenges to the travel market and has impacted directly at least 2,000 persons travelling to Canada during this week.

Given the issues affecting our own testing processes for public health interventions, the Ministry has assessed that the testing for travel could not be accommodated by the Government's national laboratory system. Therefore, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the Ministry of Health and Wellness initiated early discussions with the Jamaica Hotel and Tourist



Association, the Private Sector Organisation of Jamaica and Canadian High Commission in Jamaica to accelerate the following:

- Mobilise private labs to support the testing for persons who must travel
- Negotiate testing of samples using collaboration with overseas laboratories
- Establish partnerships with private labs and regional labs to expand capacity for testing
- Support the private sector to ensure effective use of testing within the country

Additionally, Madam Speaker, the Ministry has approved 8 private laboratories for Antigen testing and 1 private laboratory for PCR testing. These approvals have sought to strengthen the level of testing within the country and to provide the greater access to citizens who require testing for reasons outside of clinical and public health actions.

Madam Speaker, the Government's commitment remains - to safeguard the health and well-being of every Jamaican, even as we continue to implore Jamaicans from all walks of life to play their part in reducing the spread of this disease. COVID-19 is still a clear and present danger and is not over. Let us all protect ourselves from COVID-19 and at the same time protect each other. Thank you.