

Press Briefing Director's Remarks – April 14

Good morning everyone. Thank you for joining our COVID-19 briefing. I'd like to give you an overview of the Region of the Americas and then focus on PAHO's updated recommendations on social distancing.

As of April 13, there have been 610,744 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 23,753 people have lost their lives. We are seeing a significant increase in the number of cases and fatalities in the region. But we know the picture is not complete: there is an urgent need for countries to accelerate and expand testing for a more accurate understanding of the pandemic in the Americas.

Right now, 54 countries and territories are reporting cases, **and community transmission** is being reported by a growing number of countries in all sub-regions of the Americas: North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean.

COVID-19 has yet to hit with full force in our region, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, and we expect it to intensify in the next few weeks. Indeed, the rise in hospitalizations and deaths we see in some countries highlights how quickly the situation could change.

We must act with urgency before the storm hits most of our countries, to protect ourselves, our families and our communities. The cost of inaction has never been greater.

We need immediate action to address both short-term and long-term needs. In the short term, there is a dire need to expand ICU capacity in the region. Just this morning, PAHO held a virtual meeting on the Delivery and Management of Intensive Care for COVID-19, where Ministries of Health had the opportunity to learn first-hand from experts in China, Spain and other countries that had been managing their outbreaks. We are building on our Iberoamerican network to support the COVID response in the region, and will continue to do so.

In the long term, we need to plan now to guarantee that drugs and vaccines that are being developed are accessible to all in our region, especially in the most vulnerable communities. I want to take this opportunity to commend President of Costa Rica Carlos Alvarado Quesada for his proposal for WHO to establish a pool of patents, a mechanism to ensure equitable access to critical medical supplies that will allow us to fight this pandemic and future ones.

The WHO Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework that was approved in 2011, also presents a solid foundation for the global community to facilitate future access to new tools. These mechanisms of global solidarity allow us to balance the need for speedy innovation and equitable access.

Now, I would like to focus on something we are all engaged in: Social distancing. This remains our best bet to reduce transmission and slow the spread of the virus in our communities.

It prevents hospitals from being overwhelmed by too many sick people at the same time and it also keeps doctors and nurses from having to make terrible choices about which patients receive care and which patients do not. It is also a way to buy time for new treatments, medicines and vaccines that will allow us to fight COVID-19 and recover from it.

In short, physical distancing measures give our societies a chance to respond to the pandemic. Following these measures is not easy and it will be tough on our economy and way of life. But the pandemic has taught us that these measures work.

Today PAHO is issuing recommendations on physical distancing to slow the spread of COVID-19, aligned with those released by WHO, and we are working with Ministries of Health to help them implement these at country-level. There is no one-size-fits-all approach—it's impossible to apply the same measures from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. However, countries need to keep in mind that:

- We need to ensure that many of the countries in the region have implemented community-wide social distancing measures that are allowing health services to operate within their capacity – this is encouraging but it must be sustained over a period of time to be effective.
- Following a period of social distancing, any attempt to transition to more flexible measures should be taken with extreme caution. Such decisions should always be informed by disease transmission patterns, like COVID-19 testing and contact tracing capacity, the availability of hospital beds, and other objective criteria.

Social-distancing needs to be accompanied by comprehensive social-support measures to ensure the most vulnerable can comply without severe risk to their livelihoods. This will require an adequate national and local logistical capacity to ensure the delivery of medicines, tests, food and other supplies for our populations.

Implementing the measures required to stop COVID-19 can be disruptive but failing to do so will risk prolonging this crisis. Interrupting recommended social distancing too early could have the opposite effect – and lead to a second wave of COVID-19 cases, extending suffering and socioeconomic uncertainty over the long term in the Region of the Americas.

Make no mistake, economic activity will only return in full swing when people feel safe. When they feel confident that their governments are doing all they can to protect them and their loved ones. I urge the leadership in our region to earn this confidence by being rigorous, evidence-driven and transparent in the fight against this pandemic.

Only by implementing the interventions required for each setting – guided by science and solidarity – only then we can slow down, and ultimately break, the spread of COVID-19 in our region. And then together, within and across our countries, we can then safely get back on our feet.

Thank you.