

White House promises vaccine help as states rush to catch up

HOUSTON (AP) — A giant vaccination center is opening in Houston to administer 126,000 coronavirus doses in the next three weeks. Nevada health officials are working overtime to distribute delayed shots. And Rhode Island is rescheduling appointments after a vaccine shipment failed to arrive as scheduled earlier in the week.

From coast to coast, states were scrambling Tuesday to catch up on vaccinations a week after winter storms battered a large swath of the U.S. and led to clinic closures, canceled appointments and shipment backlogs nationwide.

But limited supply of the two approved COVID-19 vaccines hampered the pace of vaccinations even before last week's extreme weather delayed the delivery of about 6 million doses.

The White House promised on Tuesday that help is on the way.

States can expect about 14.5 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine this week, an almost 70% increase in distribution over the past month, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday. And White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients told governors on Tuesday that the number of doses sent directly to pharmacies will increase by about 100,000 this week, Psaki said.

The stepped-up efforts come as the COVID-19 death toll in the U.S. surpassed 500,000, far more than any other country.

More than 44 million Americans have received at least one dose of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, and about 1.4 million per day received either a first or second dose over the past seven days, according to the Centers for Disease Control



In this Feb. 19 file photo, people wait in line at a 24-hour, walk-up COVID-19 vaccination clinic hosted by the Black Doctors COVID-19 Consortium at Temple University's Liacouras Center in Philadelphia. AP PHOTO/MATT ROURKE.

and Prevention.

Although average daily deaths and cases have been falling, some experts say not enough Americans have been inoculated for the vaccine to be making enough of a difference. The decline instead is attributed to the passing of the holidays, more people staying indoors during the winter and better adherence to mask rules and social distancing.

What's more, they warn that dangerous variants could cause the trend to reverse itself. States are responding by simultaneously trying to catch up from last week's pause and gear up to vaccinate more people in the coming weeks.

Houston's federally funded vaccination site will open Wednesday at NRG Park, operating seven days a week for three weeks to distribute 126,000 first doses, before transitioning to second doses, officials said.

Texans are recovering from a devastating winter

storm that killed at least 35 people, left millions without power and water, and delayed vaccinations.

"It's been trauma after trauma, and people deserve some good news, some hope," said Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, the county's chief elected official.

In Buda, Texas, retired teachers Donna and Gerald Haschke, both 74, were supposed to get their second doses last week but had appointments canceled three times because of the storm. Now their appointment has been rescheduled for Thursday.

The couple are eager to get completely vaccinated after months of scaling back all of their activities as a precaution. Gerald Haschke has heart stents and Donna Haschke has atrial fibrillation, she said.

"My cardiologists said, 'You do not want to get COVID,'" Donna Haschke said. "I said, 'No, I don't.' To me that was a warning that I need to stay home, so we

have done that."

The Haschkes have seen their grandchildren only occasionally and while masked. Donna has stopped going to the YMCA where she used to ride the exercise bike and take water aerobics classes. She's looking forward to loosening up a bit after her second vaccine shot.

"I am definitely going to do water aerobics," she said. "If I have to wear my mask in the pool, I am going to do that."

In Mississippi, where COVID-19 vaccinations plummeted last week amid freezing temperatures and icy roads, health officials were automatically rescheduling appointments, and planned to schedule more people than normal for vaccinations through the weekend.

The state Department of Health said Monday that just 32,540 vaccinations were given in the state last week, down from 106,691 the previous week.

Critics: GOP measures target Black voter turnout in Georgia

ATLANTA (AP) — Fueled by Black turnout, Democrats scored stunning wins in Georgia in the presidential and U.S. Senate races. Now, Republicans are trying to make sure it doesn't happen again.

GOP lawmakers in the once reliably red state are rolling out an aggressive slate of voting legislation that critics argue is tailored to curtail the power of Black voters and undo years of work by Stacey Abrams and others to increase engagement among people of color, including Latino and Asian American communities.

The proposals are similar to those pushed by Republicans in other battleground states: adding barriers to mail-in and early voting, major factors in helping Joe Biden win Georgia's 16 Electoral College votes and Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff take the two Senate seats that gave Democrats control of the chamber.

But one aspect of their plans, a proposal to eliminate early voting on Sundays, seems specifically targeted at a traditional get-out-the-vote campaign used by Black churches, referred to as "souls to the polls." It's led many to suggest Republicans are trying to stop a successful effort to boost Black voter turnout in Georgia, where they make up about a third of the population and have faced a dark history of attempts to silence their voices in elections.

"It's a new form of voter suppression, the Klan in three-piece suits rather than white hoods," said the Rev. Timothy McDonald III of the First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta, which has participated in souls to the polls events. "They know the power of the Black vote, and their

goal is to suppress that power."

In previous elections, souls to the polls campaigns were festive, with vehicles and people parading to election offices during early voting windows. Churches would sometimes playfully compete to see which could bring the most voters, said McDonald, who described the GOP legislation as "spiteful."

In Georgia and elsewhere, Republicans say proposals to tighten voting access are meant to bolster confidence in elections, though they have been some of the loudest proponents of meritless claims that the election was fraudulent. The Brennan Center for Justice, a public policy group, has counted 165 bills in 33 states this year meant to limit access to voting.

In Georgia, Republicans control state government and have introduced dozens of legislative measures that would restrict voting access. GOP state Rep. Barry Fleming is chief sponsor of a wide-ranging proposal that would ban Sunday early voting, require a photo ID for absentee voting, limit the time when an absentee ballot could be requested, restrict where ballot drop boxes could be placed and curb the use of mobile voting units, among other changes.

In committee hearings, Fleming has cast the legislation as "an attempt to restore the confidence of our public in our election system." He didn't respond to an email or phone message requesting comment.

Nse Ufot, CEO of the New Georgia Project that Abrams founded in 2014, called the GOP measures a backlash "to our multi-racial, multilingual progressive majority that is winning elections."



In this 2020 photo, a recently painted mural of Ahmaud Arbery is on display in Brunswick, Ga., where the 25-year-old man was shot and killed in February. It was painted by Miami artist Marvin Weeks. AP PHOTO/SARAH BLAKE MORGAN

Memorials, lawsuit mark death anniversary of Ahmaud Arbery

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — When white men armed with guns pursued and killed Ahmaud Arbery as he ran through their neighborhood, few outside the Georgia port city of Brunswick paid much attention at first.

A year later, as three men await trial in the Feb. 23, 2020 slaying, those closest to the 25-year-old Black man sought to make sure Arbery's death isn't overlooked again.

Arbery's mother filed a civil lawsuit Tuesday accusing the men charged in her son's death and local authorities who first responded to the shooting of violating his civil rights. The complaint filed by Wanda Cooper-Jones in U.S. District Court seeks \$1 million. Attorneys for the men charged with killing Arbery say they suspected he was a burglar and committed no crimes.

Members of Arbery's family in Brunswick were expected to join a memorial procession Tuesday evening in the Satilla Shores subdivision where he fell bleeding in the street from three

close-range shotgun blasts. Other relatives planned a candlelight vigil at a church in Waynesboro, where Arbery is buried in his mother's hometown. At the Georgia state Capitol in Atlanta, Democratic lawmakers joined civil rights activists to mark the anniversary.

"It is important to remind people of the origins, when it all started," said Jason Vaughn, Arbery's high school football coach and an organizer of the Brunswick event. "For a long time, it was like we were yelling into the dark, and nobody was listening."

Immediately after the shooting, police interviewed the men who chased Arbery down, and let them walk free. The first prosecutor assigned to the case saw no reason to bring charges. Pleas for justice by Arbery's family went largely unheard as Georgia and the nation entered lockdown in the coronavirus pandemic.

Arbery had been dead for more than two months when a cellphone video of the shooting was leaked online May 5 and a national

outcry erupted. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation took over the case the next day and swiftly arrested the shooter, Travis McMichael; his father, Greg McMichael; and neighbor Roddie Bryan on murder charges.

Outrage over Arbery's slaying still simmered when a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd on May 25, igniting protests across the U.S. denouncing racial injustice.

In Brunswick, the death of Arbery served as a wake-up call to many residents, both Black and white, that they need to be more active in holding elected officials accountable, said the Rev. John Perry. He served as president of the Brunswick NAACP chapter at the time of the killing. Now he's running to be the city's next mayor.

"Previously, we elected people into office and just trusted that they would do the right thing," Perry said. "The failure to carry out justice in the Ahmaud situation said we needed to do more as citizens."

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