White House COVID team praises Mobile's vaccine efforts during a 'breaking point' in pandemic



Dr. Cameron Webb, White House Senior Police Advisor for COVID-19 Equity and a member of the White House COVID-19 Response Team, speaks to the media on Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021, inside the Mobile Civic Center in downtown Mobile, Ala. (John Sharp/jsharp@al.com).

A White House COVID-19 response team, in Mobile Thursday, praised the city's efforts to boost the region's sagging vaccination rate and encouraged cities to allow "trusted messengers" to promote vaccinations.

The group made multiple stops in Mobile as part of the Biden Administration's week-long "Community Confidence" visits to cities in the South. They kicked off the tour at the Mobile Civic Center, which has been utilized for months by USA Health as a testing and vaccination site. Within the next two weeks, USA Health will begin administering monoclonal antibodies to people who test positive for COVID-19 and are at-risk of serious illness.

Additional stops included the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce, for a roundtable discussion on mental health issues during the pandemic. Also, the group stopped off at Cutt Zone Barbershop on Springhill Avenue to help promote the "Shots at the Shop" initiative

"This is such an innovative site to have such a one-stop shop in place where folks can receive tests, the vaccine and soon the monoclonal antibodies," said Dr. Miriam Delphin-Rittman, assistant secretary for mental health and substance use with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said about the Civic Center site.

Natalie Fox, chief nursing officer at USA Health, said demand is rising for monoclonal antibodies, and that the Civic Center will serve as an alternative site from the area's hospitals to receive the treatment that typically takes around two hours. She anticipates USA Health administering 70 monoclonal antibody treatments per day at the Civic Center. USA Health is currently administering 40 per day at its hospital infusion centers.

"You have to catch it early and that's one of the challenges we are facing is to have access to (monoclonal antibodies) very early after you get diagnosed with COVID," said Fox. "Once you've been diagnosed for a few days or are sick and in need of oxygen, you no longer qualify for the antibodies. It would be too late for it to be effective."

> *"There is evidence we are at a breaking point," said White House team member Dr. Cameron Webb during a Mobile visit on Thursday. pic.twitter.com/4UAPZIiFTg*
> *— AL.com (@aldotcom) September 2, 2021*

The White House Team's tour of Mobile comes as Alabama has seen a surge in vaccinations. The vaccine climb comes at a time when infections and hospitalizations have spiked as the delta variant of the coronavirus continues its spread throughout the South.

Alabama, according to The Washington Post's data tracker, experienced a 30% increase in vaccinations over the past week which is the fifth-highest increase in the country. Alabama is no longer last in the country for its overall vaccine rate, and the state – for the first time since vaccines were authorized for emergency use by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration – is reporting half of its residents as having at least received one dose of the vaccine.

But the delta variant's spread has been widespread throughout the country, filling up hospitals and stressing healthcare staffs and creating a persistent for national leaders who thought the pandemic was coming to an end just a few months ago.

"There is evidence we are at a breaking point," said Dr. Cameron Webb, the White House Senior Policy Advisor for COVID-19 Equity and the director of health police and equity at the University of Virginia School of Medicine.

Webb, whose current role I the Biden Administration is to shape national discourse and management of the COVID-19 pandemic, said that "trusted local messengers" should be given the space and opportunity by community leaders to "speak of vaccines and their importance."

He also said that local school officials should be "empowered" to protect and advocate for children as the issue of mask mandates continues to be a hot political topic. Mobile and Baldwin counties, which had their hospitals overrun with COVID-19 patients during August, have public school systems with mandatory mask-wearing requirements in place.

Political pressure is mounting in Alabama to rescind the mask requirements. State Rep. Chip Brown, R-Mobile, is pitching legislation that allows parents to opt their children out of mask requirements in K-12 public schools by notifying the school or the local board of education in writing. Brown called it a "parental rights bill," echoing phrasing on campaign yard signs spotted throughout the region.

"The science tells us that those needs are concerns (are addressed) when students and staff are masked," Webb said. He said the White House Response Team will "continue to make the case" for mandatory masking, but also recognized that his team needs to "make sure that we can ask questions and engage appropriately."

Webb said that the White House needs "to meet the communities where they are at" when it comes other issues during the pandemic. During the team's stop in Mobile, mental health issues associated

with the pandemic were discussed during a roundtable meeting at the Chamber of Commerce.

“We know there are social and mental health ripple effects,” she said. “We are seeing increasing rates of depression and anxiety and overdose. Now more than ever, it’s critical for us to look out for each other.”