

Joe Biden pushes 'Shots at the Shop' vaccination initiative; West Virginia offers guns, cash as vaccine incentives: Today's COVID-19 updates

President Joe Biden emphasized freedom Wednesday as he launched a major push toward his goal of having 70% of American adults at least partially vaccinated against COVID-19 by July 4.

Biden announced a multipronged effort aimed at reaching that marker, including plans to recruit 1,000 Black-owned barbershops and salons to provide "Shots at the Shop" and promote vaccinations nationwide.

Other elements of the campaign include free childcare for parents who want to get vaccinated, keeping pharmacies open for 24 hours on Fridays and partnering with mayors to see which city can grow its vaccination rate the fastest. The NBA, NHL, MLB and NASCAR also plan to offer free vaccines at their competitions, while Anheuser-Busch announced free beer for vaccinated adults aged 21 years and older on July 4.

"America is heading into the summer dramatically different from last year's summer," Biden said. "A summer of freedom, a summer of joy, a summer of get-togethers and celebrations, an all-American summer that this country deserves after a long, long, dark winter that we've all endured."

Twelve states, mostly in New England and the West, have already reached the 70% threshold, and Biden said more would get there this week. The vast majority of the states with lagging vaccination rates – predominantly in the South -- typically vote Republican, and Biden again tried to disconnect inoculations from party affiliation.

"Every American over 12 years of age, no matter where you live, what you believe, who you voted for, has the right to get vaccinated," he said. "It's your choice, so please, exercise your freedom, live without fear."

Also in the news:


► Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb followed the lead of other Republican-led states and announced that Indiana will stop participating in the federal unemployment program June 19. The resulting cut in benefits is designed to prompt Indiana residents to fill low-paying jobs across the state.

► Three days after 18-year-olds became eligible for the COVID vaccine, France said children as young as 12 will start to get vaccinated June 15. More than 40% of the French population has received at least one injection.

► Alaska has begun offering coronavirus vaccinations at airports in time for the summer travel season. Vaccine eligibility has been expanded to include anyone in Alaska who is at least 12 years old, including visitors from other states or countries.

► The Spanish government and regional authorities will allow some bars and night clubs to reopen 10 months after they closed nationwide because of the pandemic. About half of Spain's 17 regions meet the criteria for reopening bars and discos.

► The Ohio Lottery plans to announce the next winners of the state's Vax-a-Million vaccination incentive prizes tonight after the lottery's Cash Explosion TV show. Most of Ohio's COVID-related health orders, [such as mask requirements, capacity limits and social-distancing guidelines](#), are ending today.

 **Today's numbers:** The U.S. has more than 33.2 million confirmed coronavirus cases and 595,400 deaths, [according to Johns Hopkins University data](#). The global totals: Over 171.3 million cases and 3.68 million deaths. More than 135.8 million Americans have been fully vaccinated – 40.9% of the population, [according to the CDC](#).

 **What we're reading:** The World Health Organization has renamed COVID-19 variants with Greek letter names – and here's why. [Read the full story](#).

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West Virginia to give away guns, trucks and \$1M as vaccine incentives

West Virginia's governor on Tuesday announced plans to give away firearms as a reward for residents who have received a COVID-19 vaccine — part of a Father's Day lottery that also includes trucks, scholarships and \$1 million in prizes.

Gov. Jim Justice said all vaccinated West Virginians will be eligible for the prizes, which include five custom hunting rifles and five custom shot guns. Justice said the June 20 lottery will mark the beginning of weekly giveaways that will continue through Aug. 4.

"Save a life and change your life," Justice said. "The more we can get vaccinated, the faster we'll get to saving all kinds of additional lives."

West Virginia has administered more than 1.3 million doses so far and currently ranks in the bottom half of the nation for vaccination rates, according to CDC data. State residents need to have received at least their first shot to be eligible and must register to be included in the giveaway, Justice said.

The lottery is just the latest example of states' attempts to boost vaccination rates with incentives. California, Maryland, New York and Oregon are among states that have announced similar programs, mostly offering cash. Ohio, West Virginia's neighbor to the west, was the first state to announce a large-scale vaccine lottery.

"I can't stand for Ohio to get ahead of us on anything," Justice said.

— Joel Shannon

Global death toll in 2021 already higher than all of last year

There have already been more COVID-19 deaths worldwide this year than in all of 2020, a USA TODAY analysis of Johns Hopkins University data shows.

Even though the U.S. and parts of Europe have implemented widespread vaccination campaigns, the coronavirus ripped through other countries, some of which had huge numbers of fatalities. In all of last

year, COVID-19 reportedly killed 1.825 million people around the world; this year's death toll is already 1.858 million.

Among the countries with the biggest disparity: Slovakia, where deaths are nearly five times higher than they were last year, and Hungary, where the toll is more than twice as bad as last year.

In addition, last year Brazil reported about 195,000 COVID-19 deaths and already has about 270,000 this year. India, where there is strong evidence that deaths are vastly undercounted, reported about 149,000 deaths in 2020 and 186,000 so far this year.

The United States reported about 352,000 dead last year and about 243,000 dead through Tuesday.

— *Mike Stucka*

'Shots at the Shop' aims to reach Black communities

The Biden administration is teaming up with the Black Coalition Against COVID, the University of Maryland Center for Health Equity and SheaMoisture [to engage 1,000 Black-owned barbershops and beauty salons](#) across the country to support local vaccine education and outreach efforts.

The "Shots at the Shop" initiative [comes two weeks after USA TODAY reported on 10 Black hair salons and barbershops in Maryland](#) that public health practitioners and researchers have transformed into health and wellness intervention hubs aiming to fight health disparities. As vaccination rates in communities of color hit hard by COVID-19 lag in many states, the network is combating vaccine hesitancy by offering shots at a place of business that also often serves as a gathering spot.

“This big push to recognize the barber shops and beauty salons in Black and brown communities as assets to be mobilized is just a blessing,” said Stephen Thomas, director of the Center for Health Equity. “I could not be more excited and ecstatic.”

Anthony Fauci emails: 'All is well despite some crazy people in this world'

Emails sent by Dr. Anthony Fauci in the early days of the pandemic reflect the thoughts of a patient but weary man who is flabbergasted by his overnight celebrity. Hundreds of emails were obtained by [The Washington Post](#) and other media organizations through Freedom of Information Act requests. Fauci responds to hundreds of interrogators, many he doesn't know, often with in-depth answers.

Fauci also corresponded on multiple occasions with George Gao, a top infectious disease official in China. Gao sent an encouraging note when Fauci was being blasted by President Trump supporters who blamed him for backing social distancing rules that closed schools, tanked the economy and threatened Trump's reelection prospects.

“Thank you for your kind note,” Fauci replied three days later. “All is well despite some crazy people in this world.”

Fauci marveled at an April 2020 story titled "'Cuomo Crush' and 'Fauci Fever' — Sexualization of These Men Is a Real Thing on the Internet." Fauci forwarded the email to someone whose identity was redacted, urging the person to click on the link.

“It will blow your mind,” Fauci wrote. “Our society is really totally nuts.”

Twin cities drop mask mandates

Minnesota's twin cities now have matching mask requirements – none.

St. Paul ended its mask mandate Wednesday, one day after Minneapolis announced it was dropping its mask requirement. Both cities' leaders cited rising vaccination rates. Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey imposed the indoor mask mandate last spring, two months before Gov. Tim Walz issued a similar statewide mask order. Frey said the mandate was lifted because more than 78% of city residents age 15 and older have received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose.

St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter acknowledged that his city had not yet reached benchmarks set by local public health experts: "The reality of a maskless Minneapolis limits the logic and efficacy of maintaining a masking order alone," Carter said.

Vaccinations alone may not end pandemic, study suggests

Decreased infections, hospitalizations and deaths have followed steady vaccination rates, but a new research suggests they may not be enough to end the coronavirus pandemic. Masks and social distancing coupled with widespread vaccinations had the biggest impact on limiting infections and deaths, and infections will continue if quarantine protections are lifted, a team of researchers from the University of North Carolina found in [a new study](#).

"Our study suggests that, for a population of 10.5 million, approximately 1.8 million infections and 8,000 deaths could be prevented during 11 months with more efficacious COVID-19 vaccines, higher vaccination coverage, and maintaining NPIs (non-pharmaceutical interventions), such as distancing and use of face masks," they wrote.

Last month, the CDC released controversial new guidance that said [fully vaccinated Americans don't need to wear a mask](#), even indoors, except in crowded settings like airplanes, buses and health care facilities.

EU launches COVID-19 vaccine passport program

The European Union launched the [EU Digital COVID Certificate](#) throughout the region. The "digital pass" will create a single hub for all EU citizens to hold their vaccination and COVID-19 status as they cross borders and travel.

The digital pass uses unique QR codes for everyone, with paper ones accessible to those without a device. So far, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Croatia and Poland have passed technical tests and started issuing the EU certificates.

New Mexico institutes vaccine lottery with \$5 million grand prize

Getting vaccinated against COVID-19 disease "is the right thing to do — for yourself, for your family and for your state," Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said in a statement Tuesday. And [there might also be some money in it](#).

The governor announced that the state health department and the New Mexico Lottery were jointly launching a "Vax 2 the Max" sweepstakes, with \$10 million in cash and other prizes available for residents who get vaccinations against the coronavirus. New Mexico's grand prize, funded by federal pandemic relief money, tops vaccine lottery prizes offered in California and Ohio. California offered a \$1.5 million grand prize.

– *Algernon D'Amassa, Las Cruces (N.M.) Sun-News*

Some states vaccinate at higher rate inside prisons than outside

Some states, including in California, have vaccinated a higher rate of individuals inside of prisons than outside, while others struggle to vaccinate their prison populations.

More than 73% of inmates in California and Kansas prisons have received at least one COVID vaccine dose, according to data from the COVID Prison Project. By contrast, 56% of all Californians have received their first dose, [according to the New York Times](#). Prisons populations have been some of the hardest hit in the country. Incarcerated people are infected at a rate more than five times higher than the nation's overall rate, reported the [Equal Justice Initiative](#).

Attitudes change as normalcy returns

Many Americans are feeling [a shift in attitude and perspective](#) as states reopen, COVID-19 cases drop and vaccination numbers climb. Historians speak of "mass disruptive events" resulting in permanent changes, although it's not clear yet what changes the pandemic will prompt.

Gary Darden, associate professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University, defines such events as "something that unfolds over a long period of time and has a profound impact on nearly every American's life." Other mass disruptive events include World War I, the Great Depression and the Spanish flu — different, Darden says, from pinpoint catastrophes like 9/11.

The Spanish flu and World War I, for example, are the reasons your bathroom is tiled, he said.

"The trenches they fought in were filthy, full of lice and dead bodies and rot," said Darden. Tiled bathrooms, linoleum floors and metal bedframes became popular because "you could douse metal and tile in bleach or vinegar." [Read more here](#).

– *Rebecca King, NorthJersey.com*

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