COVID-19 vaccinations coordinator details plan for speed, equity

MAR 12, 2021

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From educating “vaccine curious” patients about the SARS-CoV-2 vaccines to helping administer inoculations, physicians will play a big role in ending the pandemic, according to White House vaccinations coordinator Bechara Choucair, MD.

The White House is working with the AMA and other physician organizations to determine how to best engage doctors as vaccine supplies continue to increase, Dr. Choucair said at the 2021 AMA National Advocacy Conference. In a Feb. 18 letter, the AMA strongly urged the Biden administration “to ensure physician offices can participate in vaccine administration and to encourage states to include these sites of care in their distribution plans.”

“I’ve heard loud and clear that patients are coming to the provider asking questions and that providers needs answers,” said Dr. Choucair, a family physician by training, who, prior to joining the White House, oversaw Kaiser Permanente’s efforts to create the nation’s largest social health network to meet patients’ housing, food and transportation needs. Kaiser Permanente, through the affiliation of several of its physician-led Permanente Medical Groups, is an AMA Health System Program Partner.

Learn more in this Q&A with Dr. Choucair, during his time at Kaiser, about how COVID-19 is transforming public health.

100-day race
He told physicians that the Biden-Harris administration is on track to meet its goal of 100 million shots administered in 100 days.

“On day 101 we are going to wake up and work hard—if not harder—to get as many people vaccinated as fast and possible. And the only way to do that is to have more vaccines available and more places to get vaccinated,” he said.

When it comes to the vaccines’ role in ending the pandemic, Dr. Choucair sees three primary areas that need to be addressed, an increase in: vaccine supply, vaccinators and places where people can get vaccinated. And, he said, the White House is working to make all of that happen and in an equitable way.

The AMA recognizes the critical importance of scientific integrity, transparency and public trust in the fight to contain the global spread of COVID-19 and plan for the authorization, distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines. Stay updated with the AMA on COVID-19 and vaccine development.

**Ramping up supply**

During the last week in February, 14.5 million vaccine doses were delivered to states, territories and tribal areas, Dr. Choucair said. That’s up from 8.6 million doses being delivered just a few weeks earlier.
He said the administration is also striving to increase the visibility of the vaccine supply so that state and local leaders know three weeks ahead of time how much vaccine they can expect. And supply is expected to rise in the coming weeks and months, Dr. Choucair said to the hundreds of physicians and others attending the AMA conference, held virtually this year due to the pandemic.

For starters, the government can now send supplies to ensure a sixth dose can be extracted from all Pfizer-BioNTech vials. That’s up from five doses per vial.

And, as the government has previously announced, there will be 600 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines by the end of summer, enough to vaccinate every adult in the nation. Then there will come the additional doses from Johnson & Johnson’s single-dose vaccine.

Expanding vaccination sites

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is lending financial, staffing and technical support to get vaccination sites up and running, to the tune of $3.4 billion. More than 1,300 members of the FEMA staff and 800 vaccinators have dispersed across the country to help vaccine efforts. In addition, active-duty military members have been deployed to help and more are expected to be deployed as the rollout continues, Dr. Choucair said.

Efforts to ramp up vaccine distribution at the nation’s 1,300 community health centers will continue, he added. Nationwide, these facilities serve 300 million people. About two-thirds of the health centers’ patients are at or below the poverty line and about 60% come from the racial and ethnic groups that have been the hardest hit by the pandemic.

The AMA’s COVID-19 vaccines guide for physicians contains evidence-based messaging guidance and best practices for consideration in external communications on COVID-19 vaccine topics.