

## Susan Bailey, MD, discusses a Senate hearing on the pandemic

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### Featured topic and speakers

In today's COVID-19 Update, Susan R. Bailey, MD, AMA's immediate past president, recaps her testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions on steps to end the pandemic.

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#### Speaker

- Susan R. Bailey, MD, immediate past president, AMA

### Transcript

**Unger:** Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today I'm joined by AMA's Immediate Past President Dr. Susan Bailey, an allergist and immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas, about a recent Senate hearing where she discussed obstacles to ending the pandemic. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Dr. Bailey, welcome back.

**Dr. Bailey:** Thank you.

**Unger:** Excited to talk to you about what was one of your, I guess, first live presentations and this one—very high profile one with the Senate. I want to talk to you about your testimony to the Senate health, education, labor and pension committee last Tuesday. Can you just start by giving us some background on the purpose of the hearing?

**Dr. Bailey:** The purpose of this Senate health committee hearing, it was really, I think the first hearing

that they've had live talking about vaccine hesitancy and where we are at this part and the pandemic. There were four witnesses. Aside from me, we had Dr. Michelle Nichols, who is the associate dean of clinical affairs at the Morehouse School of Medicine. We had Dr. Jeanette Betancourt, who's the senior vice president for U.S. social impact at Sesame Workshop talking mostly about vaccine education and children and families. And we had Mr. Curtis Chang, who is a professor at Duke Divinity School talking about increasing vaccine confidence among evangelical groups. So it was a very bipartisan hearing, really a fact gathering hearing, just focusing on the importance for more and more people that become vaccinated and discussing the obstacles that still stand in the way.

**Unger:** That is a very interesting set of speakers and really important because I think a lot of Americans think that the pandemic is already behind us. Why is it so important right now to continue to confront the barriers that we're seeing?

**Dr. Bailey:** Well, as of the date of this hearing, June 22 of 2021, there were 55% of American adults over the age of 18 that had been fully vaccinated, 65% have had at least one injection. But there are now concerns that we will not meet President Biden's goal of 70% of Americans getting at least one injection by the Fourth of July because immunization rates have slowed down dramatically as we knew they would. Once that the initial demand was met, we knew that the supply would far out exceed the demand and that it would be harder and harder to reach more hesitant folks. There's also some concern, especially now with the vaccine being approved for use down the age of 12. There are still many people that are concerned about the risk and benefits of vaccination versus not vaccinating. And also with the emergence of new variants, the new Delta variant, which has just all of a sudden gone from 10% to 19% of U.S. infections and appears to be on its way to completely take over of other variants in the United States.

**Unger:** The big threat to unvaccinated people and clearly a real issue and why we have to keep the pedal to the metal on the vaccinations. In terms of all the barriers that you discussed, one of them is clearly the role of social media in spreading this information throughout the pandemic. Can you talk about what we've seen and the detrimental impact that it's had on our efforts to put the pandemic behind us?

**Dr. Bailey:** Well, there is no question that social media has been a major driver of spreading misinformation and disinformation because it's so easy to take statements on Twitter or Facebook or whatever platform you're using at face value and not really realize who it's coming from and whether or not it's even true. And one of the things I brought up during the hearing was how concerned the AMA has been and continues to be about this and the importance of holding social media companies accountable for helping to spread disinformation. We think that's going to be very important going forward. It's not censorship, it's not controlling speech, it's about being accomplices to deliberate harm when vaccine lies are being perpetuated.

**Unger:** And a lot of this misinformation and disinformation, as you say, it's orchestrated. This is

reasonably sophisticated work that's going on out there. Can you give us some examples of the type of misinformation that's getting traction on social media that we're confronting right now?

**Dr. Bailey:** I think that we're seeing all sorts of disinformation that we've been hearing all along concerns about the vaccines causing infertility, which they do not. Concerns about the vaccines making you magnetic, which they do not. Concerns about 5G chips being implanted, which they are not. But as well as just planting little seeds of doubt and uncertainty, and reinforcing concerns about how quickly the vaccines were produced and playing on people's lack of understanding about the difference between the emergency use authorization process and full biologic licensure approval. So there are so many things that are being perpetuated, and it's really important for physicians, for medical groups, for trusted advisors to make ourselves heard on social media, to make sure that those voices spreading misinformation are not the only ones out there.

**Unger:** Well, speaking of misinformation, a big focus of your presidency and of the AMA over the past year and a half has been really combating misinformation. Can you talk about the AMA's efforts to do this?

**Dr. Bailey:** All along AMA has worked incredibly hard to make sure that physicians knew everything they needed to know about COVID and especially about the vaccine development process. We had a series of webinars during the year every step along the way to make sure physicians had the chance to get their questions answered, because we know that physicians have always been vaccine's greatest ambassadors and if we were completely confident about COVID-19 vaccination, we would be able to transfer that confidence to our patients. So we have also been active on social media, also been active educating patients and physicians about vaccine hesitancy—how it's okay to ask questions, how we need to get vaccines in physicians' offices so that we can capitalize on that very powerful, trusted relationship between patient and physician to get their questions answered and hopefully get the vaccine.

**Unger:** Yeah, that's been so important and those webinars were such an important piece of information and literally thousands of physicians having that chance to hear directly from folks at the CDC and FDA was pretty important. One of the other important topics that you brought up at the Senate hearing was about the importance of preventing disparities in vaccine acceptance in different communities and preventing disparities going forward. This was a problem as we entered the pandemic, boy, did we see that brought to light. Can you talk about some of the key takeaways there?

**Dr. Bailey:** We discussed this at length. Dr. Nichols from Morehouse School of Medicine was a wonderful resource discussing that, but we've known from the beginning that there was going to be a higher level of vaccine hesitancy among communities of color because of the historical mistrust in the medical system dating as far back as the Tuskegee experiments. And we know that it's important to meet people where they are to deliver those messages through trusted messengers in various communities and that might be done in a different way in every single community. We need a national

campaign and national focus to help make sure this gets done, but those messages often have to be delivered at the local level. And the importance of understanding people's hesitancy, again, encouraging them to ask questions. And I think one of the most encouraging things about this whole campaign has been that vaccine confidence has increased in every different group that we've looked at, in Blacks, in Latinx populations. And that has really been very encouraging that those messages are being heard and acted on.

**Unger:** Do you think, too, I think one of the key messages coming out of the AMA has been about incorporating equity in terms of access to vaccinations and in terms of distribution, did you learn anything about that particular area?

**Dr. Bailey:** We learned that mass vaccination sites, of course, do not work for everybody, but especially in some marginalized communities who may have less access to transportation. They may have more difficult time taking off work, they may be more concerned about lost wages, not only from the time taken off to get the vaccine but also potential lost wages and even losing a job if they feel bad and have the normal side effects after vaccination of feeling flu-like for a day or two, and emphasize the importance of employers understanding this and making allowances for their employees. But also the importance of having very flexible hours for vaccine administration is incredibly important for folks that do shift work that can't come in between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. during the day may need to come in even overnight hours, that access like that is incredibly important. And again, not bringing the people to the vaccines, but bringing the vaccines to the people as we go on is going to be a very important part of this.

**Unger:** I know we have home delivery now here in Chicago, so we are definitely moving toward that but you've had, let's call it about a week since your presidency concluded, and I'm curious in terms of the perspective having served during this incredibly unusual time, when you think about the biggest lessons that we've learned so far, what would you say they are?

**Dr. Bailey:** Oh gosh, well, we have learned so much during this pandemic. We've also lost a lot and the pandemic has definitely shown a very bright light on the cracks in our health care system and especially on the devastating impact of health disparities. So we have learned the importance of taking advantage of new forms of communication, of virtual avenues, such as this and learning how we really can spread the word and educate people even if we don't meet them face to face. And now that 96 plus percent of physicians are vaccinated, it has become very clear that the more you know about COVID-19 vaccines, the more you understand about them, the greater your confidence, the more likely you are to get vaccinated.

**Unger:** It's good to see physicians leading the way. Trust your doctor and get vaccinated. Thanks so much Dr. Bailey for being here. It's a pleasure talking to you again and great to have seen you testify at that Senate hearing. We appreciate your perspective as always. That's it for today's COVID-19 Update. Join us for another segment soon. In the meantime, for resources on COVID 19, visit [ama-assn.org/COVID-19](https://ama-assn.org/COVID-19)



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