

Pence says America ready to meet growing contagion after dire Fauci warning

Vice President Mike Pence said America was better prepared than ever to respond to surging coronavirus cases after a dire warning from the nation's top infectious diseases expert that the number of new cases could soon top 100,000 a day.

He said the pandemic response was focusing on states seeing a spike in cases, making sure health workers had personal protective equipment, therapeutics, and tests.

Speaking after the second coronavirus task force meeting in two days, Pence said: "We're ready. We're more prepared than ever before. And I want the people, particularly in the 12 states that we see rising cases and rising positivity, to know that we're with them."

It was the second time Pence addressed Washington reporters in a week on the subject after two months in which the White House Coronavirus Task Force had not held a public briefing.

A surge in cases has seen states such as Florida, Arizona, Texas, and California reverse course on reopening, closing bars, limiting restaurant capacity, and stepping up warnings.

And during a Senate hearing on reopening schools, the infectious disease chief at the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Anthony Fauci, warned that a string of outbreaks could have a dire impact without urgent action.

"We are now having 40-plus-thousand new cases a day. I would not be surprised if we go up to 100,000 a day if this does not turn around, and so, I am very concerned," he said.

Pence has been accused of playing down the risk and painting an overly rosy picture as coronavirus declines were reversed.

Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, said the problem was a White House that saw the crisis as largely a manufacturing problem.

“They cannot get their arms around the fact that they need to implement higher-order thinking and actually lead strategy, create and design and road map,” he said. “Until they do this, I worry the number of cases will continue to accelerate as Dr. Fauci suggested today.”

Fauci was not present at the task force briefing, nor its other leading scientist Dr. Deborah Birx, who is in Arizona, one of the hot spots.

Pence said the task force was working with governors to ensure states had the resources they needed.

“We’re in a much better place than we were four months ago or even two months ago,” he said, praising people for social distancing and healthcare workers for their dedication.

He said 12 states were recording an increase in cases and in the number of positive tests. A further 28 states were seeing an increase in one of those two statistics, he said during the briefing, which was held at the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps Headquarters in Maryland.

But he insisted that the setbacks were not the result of states opening too early.

“Texas and Florida and other states involved here reopened very early in May, and they implemented the phased guidelines that we published to open up America again. And through the course of the entire month of May and into early June, their cases were low and steady, and their positivity rates weren’t rising, but something changed about two weeks ago.”

Earlier, presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden launched an attack on what he called President Trump’s “historic mismanagement” of the crisis.

“The American people don’t make enormous sacrifices over the past four months, so ... you can waste all their efforts they have undertaken with your midnight rantings and tweets,” Biden said during a speech to reporters in a high school gym in Delaware.

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