



# **CONTRIBUTION**

**of**

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Minister of Health**

**COVID-19 Update**

**HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY  
NASSAU, THE BAHAMAS**

**21<sup>ST</sup> APRIL, 2021**

**Mr. Speaker,**

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has reached an all-time high. COVID-19 cases and deaths continue to surge. The world is now seeing the highest rate of infection. The Director-General Dr. Tedros Adnonim Ghebreyesus, in a press conference on Friday, 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2021, reported that “around the world cases and deaths are continuing to increase at worrying rates.” He continued, “globally the number of new cases per week has nearly doubled over the past two months. This is approaching the highest rate of infection that we have seen so far during the pandemic. Some countries that had previously avoided widespread transmission are now seeing steep increased infections.” This picture is also true for the Region of the Americas, and even closer to home, the CARICOM member states.

**Mr. Speaker,**

The Bahamas is no exception. Our data clearly shows that we are in another surge. We are noticing a pattern that was seen at the beginning of the second wave. Yes, Mr. Speaker, we saw how COVID-

19 cases slowed down during the second wave at the end of October, beginning of November 2020 with no definitive end. We maintained a steady-state for some months. However, by the end of February beginning of March, the picture changed, and in recent weeks there has been a three-fold increase in cases, which is almost 300%, from that time to now.

**Mr. Speaker,**

New Providence continues to be the epicenter and the greatest contributor to the total COVID-19 burden in-country. Of the approximately one thousand nine hundred (1,901) new cases reported between the beginning of 2021 to now, one thousand and seventy-nine (1,079) of these have been in New Providence. This translates to almost sixty percent (60%) of new cases being allocated to the total from New Providence.

**Mr. Speaker,**

There has been a quieting of new cases on islands such as Eleuthera, Abaco and Grand Bahama compared to prior weeks. In Abaco for example, 12.5 new cases on average each week were being reported for the last two months. Last week Abaco reported one (1) new case.

**Mr. Speaker,**

This quieting is in part due to special missions into these islands.

From 30<sup>th</sup> March – 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2021, a health team was dispatched to Eleuthera to assess and intensify contact tracing activities there, with special emphasis on Harbour Island. Similar activity occurred on the island of Abaco and a team is currently in Grand Bahama.

The team visiting Eleuthera completed the following tasks:

- Determined the number of COVID-19 positive cases;
- Assessed whether there was a need for widespread testing;
- Evaluated the manpower on the ground to enforce policies

and procedures;

- Commenced the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccinations;
- Made recommendations for improvements which include
  - the acquisition of additional staff to augment the existing staff complement on the island;
  - and
  - to encourage residents and visitors to adhere to the public health guidelines.

The health team also trained personnel on updated protocols for quarantine and isolation and assisted with contact tracing activities and enforcing quarantine and isolation measures on Harbour Island.

**Mr. Speaker,**

Several metrics are used for tracking progress on the COVID-19 front, such as incident cases, COVID-19 hospitalizations as a function of available COVID-19 beds, human resource capacity and death – to name a few. Hospitalization rates among active cases have increased

as have ICU admissions. At the beginning of January, deaths were 171. From then to now there has been a 13.5% increase in COVID-19 deaths. Notably, from April 1-10, 2021 deaths remained constant at 189. We are all noticing that COVID-19 deaths are slowly increasing due in part to the increase in new deaths, but also due to the further reassessment of a number of deaths that were initially registered as “under investigation.” Deaths now stand at 194.

**Mr. Speaker,**

The transmissibility rate and the positivity rate add further insights into our national understanding and epidemiologic profile for COVID-19. The “positivity rate” — or how prevalent positive cases of the disease are, when compared to the number of tests being done. Notwithstanding some existing limitations, the available data suggests an increasing positivity rate for The Bahamas.

**Mr. Speaker,**

The Ministry strongly believes there to be an association between the uptick in ICU admissions and the level of COVID-19 severity at presentation to our tertiary care institutions. Further investigations will shed light on whether the severity at presentation is linked to SARS-CoV-2 variants which current genomic screening by the National Reference Laboratory now suggests are circulating in the Bahamian population.

**Mr. Speaker,**

The National Reference Laboratory is now using the PCR-based approach to screen for variants of concern. This approach is a proxy of genomic sequencing that permits rapid monitoring of the spread of variants of concern localized in a community. Although this technology enables the identification of genomic mutation/deletions and is strongly indicative, it does not permit us to specify whether the mutation is specific to the known variants of concern – the UK, South African, Brazilian, and now, most recently Indian variant. Our

collaborations continue with laboratories outside of our jurisdiction, such as CARPHA, to specifically identify the variants of concern that are likely in circulation in The Bahamas.

**Mr. Speaker,**

The testing materials for the in-country variant screening were provided by PAHO and received at the National Reference Laboratory a little over a week ago. We commend the forward-thinking of the Laboratory Director, Dr. Indira Martin. The NRL completed screening of some 120 COVID-19 positive samples collected from the 13<sup>th</sup> March to 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2021. From the analysis of these 120 samples, the National Reference Laboratory was able to make the following conclusions:

- there has been a weekly steady increase in the percentage of samples carrying the characteristic mutation present in three of the variants.



- In the week of 13<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2021, approximately 20% of the COVID-19 positive samples screened contained the variant mutation; and
- during the most recent week analyzed - 11<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2021, an alarming 80% of the samples screened contained the variant mutation.

**Mr. Speaker,**

This trend in the data indicates that one or more of the variants of concern entered the Bahamas, likely sometime in early March. Further, the variants have rapidly come to dominate our COVID-19 infections in the country.

We already know from our previous data sequencing from the Reference Laboratory in Brazil, there was no evidence of the variants in the samples up until November, 2020. However, we await the **sequencing** results of the samples sent to CARPHA, in mid-March. These results will assist to confirm our proxy results from the PCR

screen and give us more detailed information on which strains are present in The Bahamas.

**Mr. Speaker,**

As it stands, the national COVID-19 Report for The Bahamas is as follows:

On Tuesday, 20<sup>st</sup> April, 2021, yesterday, there were **68** newly confirmed cases of COVID-19, up from the 9 cases reported for Monday 19<sup>th</sup> April. This brings the total number of confirmed cases in The Bahamas to **9,868**.

From our latest data there are **9** moderately ill COVID-19 patients hospitalized in the Grand Bahama Health Care System. There are no patients currently in intensive care in Grand Bahama.

In New Providence, there are **18** hospitalized COVID-19 patients at Doctor's Hospital. **Fifteen** are moderately ill and **3** are currently in the Intensive Care Unit.

There are **6** moderately ill COVID-19 patients being treated at the South Beach Acute Care and Referral Centre.

At the Princess Margaret Hospital, there are **18** moderately ill patients with COVID-19. There are no patients in the ICU at PMH at this time.

In all, there are **464** active cases of COVID-19. **Eighty-one** persons have been recently classified as recovered from COVID-19. This brings the total number of recoveries to **9,140**, for a recovery rate of **92.6%**.

Fortunately, there were no deaths confirmed yesterday. The total number of confirmed COVID-19 deaths as previously stated, now stands at **194**. **Twenty-six** deaths remains under investigation.

**Mr. Speaker,**

One COVID-19 death to us in the Ministry of Health, as I've said previously, is still one too many. We continue to pray for the families

in The Bahamas who have lost loved ones to this persistent plague, this unrelenting COVID-19 pandemic, that Lord knows, I pray it comes to an end very soon, for my people.

**Mr. Speaker,**

A total of **83,288** RT-PCR tests have been carried out for COVID-19 in the country. **575** tests were performed yesterday, with **68** positives and **494** negatives. **Thirteen** tests were repeated to determine recoveries. There were no inconclusive test results. Of note, **Mr. Speaker**, unknown case location designation has been significantly decreased from a high of 382 to now only 35 due to a data clean exercise recently completed and reported yesterday. Mr. Speaker, we continue to progress.

**Mr. Speaker,**

Please let it be known to all and sundry, that as we were able to deploy an effective strategy of testing, tracing, isolation, and

treatment to gain control of our circumstance and get us to the steady-state after the second wave we are poised, positioned, prepared and executing.

**Mr. Speaker, regarding COVID-19 Testing Capacity**

We have established robust in-country testing platforms across the public and private sectors.

- The National Reference Laboratory conducts RT-PCR COVID-19 testing and is optimizing reagents and testing supplies.
- At the Princess Margaret Hospital, there are multiple technology platforms. We have the GeneXpert, we have the Panther and the BioFire COVID-19 RTPCR testing equipment.
- In Grand Bahama Health Services we have the GeneXpert.
- Private Sector Capacity has also been significantly augmented since 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> wave for both RTPCR and Rapid Antigen testing.

**Mr. Speaker, in regards to our Quarantine/Isolation Site**

We have reinstated our Contractual Agreement with the facility and the facility is currently functional and functioning.

**Mr. Speaker, we have adequate in-county bed Capacity**

The Ministry of Health and the government stands ready to cope with the COVID-19 hospitalizations in the country, having expanded our bed capacity significantly during our second wave experience.

- Doctors Hospital Health System
  - Doctors Hospital West - 25 beds,
  - Doctors Hospital East – 3 beds, 1 ICU
- Princess Margaret Hospital
  - The Legacy Isolation Unit – 8 beds
  - Special Pathogens Unit – 30 beds and
  - Private ward rooms can be expanded for additional space
- On Grand Bahama Health

- Currently, there are a total of 23 beds available for COVID-19 patients – 16 beds at the Cancer Association of The Bahamas, and seven (7) beds at the Infectious Disease Centre.
- The South Beach Acute Care and Referral Centre.
  - Has a 10 beds capacity with flexible expansion to accommodate an additional 16 beds

**Mr. Speaker in regards to our Personal Protective Equipment Supplies**

- The Supplies Management Agency is fully stocked to cover masks, gloves, gowns, shoe covers, and full overalls, etc. as well as additional equipment and supplies for a sustained response while protecting our health care workers.

**Mr. Speaker,**

Despite readiness, however, we must continue to adhere to public health precautions to break the chains of transmission of the

virus. We can ill afford, an exponential increase in the number of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.

**Mr. Speaker**

Ongoing Surveillance and monitoring have and continue to be essential in our COVID-19 response. Increasing cases result in increasing contacts. Lessons learned from the second wave have informed early recognition of the need to ramp up. Augmenting contact tracing is well on the way. Trained agents from NHIA have been reinstated as of Monday, 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2021. These agents join already reinstated agents from the Ministry of Education, Treasury and other agencies. Further augmentation is anticipated drawing from the pool of over 100 trained agents utilized in the second wave and newly trained ready-to-hire agents.



**Mr. Speaker,**

The engine of our response to COVID-19 relies heavily on our healthcare workers. As we continue to augment our response, more and more is required of our health workforce. We have a challenge. Our nursing personnel is depleting. Mr. Speaker, we are losing many of them, to hospitals in the United States. I take this opportunity to make a clarion call to all nurses in the community to come forward to assist. We need your help! And we appreciate your help.

**Mr. Speaker,**

Protocols and policies alone cannot get us out of this. It is what you and I practice from day to day that will! I would like to remind the Bahamian public that the virus travels with people. As we continue to adhere to public health measures and the Emergency Orders, we decrease opportunities for the virus to spread. We now renew our earlier plea:

- Wear your mask;

- Sanitize hands frequently;
- Avoid large gatherings; and
- Adhere to physical distancing when out and about.

**Mr. Speaker,**

We reiterate the proven strategy to combat COVID-19 pandemic is to adhere to public health measures, testing, isolation, trace and treat. But Mr. Speaker, vaccination is a critical element in controlling the spread of COVID-19 and bringing an end to this pandemic. And as we all know Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 vaccinations are now available in-country.

**Mr. Speaker**

The roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine in The Bahamas began on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March.

Since then, 21,907 doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine have been administered at vaccination sites and by mobile units across New Providence, Grand Bahama, Eleuthera and Abaco.

Sixteen thousand nine hundred and thirty-four (16,934) doses have been administered on New Providence; 3,512 doses on Grand Bahama; 832 on Abaco and 638 on Eleuthera.

During the 7 days of vaccine distribution from the 9<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, the team administered 9,546 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, for an average of 1,364 doses per day.

This week more than 4,000 appointments are offered to the public via the [vax.gov.bs](https://vax.gov.bs) portal.

Appointments are available at the Kendal G.L. Isaacs National Gymnasium, Loyola Hall, Pilgrim Baptist Church, Church of God of Prophecy and St. Anselm's Church, starting Thursday.

Most sites are open from 9 am to 3 pm. The Kendal G.L. Isaacs Gym site is open from 2 pm to 6 pm.

Vaccination centers were initially operating Monday to Saturday but as we expanded, the schedule was changed to Monday to Friday.

Mobile units are also being used to reach resident facilities and the home-bound with physical disabilities.

**Mr. Speaker**

So far, The Bahamas has received a total of 53,600 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Twenty thousand doses were received as a gift from the Government of India. 33,600 doses were received through the COVAX Facility with the assistance of the Pan American Health Organization. Continuing with PAHO, The Bahamas is scheduled to receive an additional 67,200 vaccines through the COVAX Facility. We are pleased to report that The Bahamas has been informed by the Pan-American Health Organization that it will receive the second tranche of AstraZeneca vaccines through the COVAX Facility before the end of May.

This tranche will consist of 33,000 doses. This leaves a remaining 34,200 doses to be received through the COVAX Facility.

**Mr. Speaker**

Final preparations are underway for the full roll-out of the vaccine program in all of the Family Islands.

Health and logistics teams were deployed yesterday to start carrying out reconnaissance visits in preparation for the start of vaccinations in the islands during the week of the 26<sup>th</sup> of April.

Health teams will be supported by local government officials, health administrators and community leaders.

These teams will prepare vaccination sites, secure the necessary supplies and conduct training for the online platform.

In the Family Islands, the COVID-19 vaccine will be administered to all residents 18 years and older with a Bahamian government-issued ID in line with the following proposed schedule:

- **Monday 26 April:** Andros-north, central and south, Mayaguana, Inagua, Crooked Island, Acklins, Long Cay, Ragged Island and mainland Exuma;
- **Tuesday 27 April:** Berry Islands (Great Harbour Cay), Cat Island, San Salvador and Long Island, Exuma Cays and Rum Cay;
- **Wednesday 28 April:** North, central and south Eleuthera; and
- **Friday 30 April:** Bimini.

### **Mr. Speaker**

The location of vaccination sites, days and times for each island will be published on the [opm.gov.bs](https://opm.gov.bs) site and will be widely circulated.

Online and on-site appointments will be available at all Family Island locations.

Family Island residents can make their appointments online at

<https://vax.gov.bs>.

Vaccination centers in New Providence and Grand Bahama will remain open during the Family Island roll-out, as they have been.

**Mr. Speaker**

The AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine is a two-dose regimen.

The administration of the second dose of this vaccine will begin on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May.

**Mr. Speaker,**

Currently, vaccinations are open to the following persons at this time in New Providence and Grand Bahama:

- Healthcare workers;
- Persons 50 years of age and older;
- Persons with disabilities;
- Uniformed branches (the Royal Bahamas Police Force, the Royal Bahamas Defence Force, the Bahamas Departments of Corrections, Customs, Immigration, and COVID-19 Ambassadors);

- Teachers and staff of schools;
- Homebound, physically challenged residents;
- Students and athletes studying or competing abroad, coaches and other support; and
- Hospitality workers (hotel and resort employees, public transportation workers, Lynden Pindling International Airport workers, Nassau Airport Development Company, Nassau Cruise Port workers, the Straw Market, port and beach vendors and tour operators);
- Restaurant and retail workers;
- Members of the clergy; and
- Accredited media (editors, reporters/anchors, photographers and videographers).



**Mr. Speaker,**

This list is continually being updated and expanded by the National Consultative Committee and others will soon be added.

I take the opportunity in this House to encourage every Bahamian to take the vaccine at the earliest opportunity when it becomes available for your group or subset of our population.

**Mr. Speaker,**

On another note, it is remarkable how persons find an opportunity to take advantage of the difficult situations of others. Police reports reveal that a 34-year-old Bahamian woman was arraigned in the Magistrate's courts a few days ago on 80 counts of forgery and 80 counts of possession of a forged document. The woman was arraigned in connection with the recent trend in fraudulent COVID-19 test results. We urge the public who are aware of such fraudulent test programmes to report these actions/incidents

to the police as these fraudulent activities can cause lives and lead to irrevocable damage to our economy.

**Mr. Speaker,**

The Ministry of Health wishes to advise that there is zero-tolerance for such behaviour and that those who persist will be prosecuted by the fullest extent of the law. The person offering the forged document and the person receiving the same are both public health risks in the highest order to our society. As COVID-19 persons who are positive and acquire a fraudulent negative COVID-19 test result can spread COVID-19 throughout the community in seconds. This will not be tolerated.

**Mr. Speaker,**

However, we owe the Bahamian public a debt of gratitude for continually adhering to preventative measures. It is because of their discipline we once brought down escalating COVID-19 cases to zero in the first wave and near zero in the second wave. We must remain

steadfast to see that result again. Therefore, let us all remain vigilant, and continue to demonstrate responsible behaviour.

**Mr. Speaker,**

It is true, no one was ever prepared for a disruption of life as we now know it. Yes, the pandemic has pushed us into maintaining social distancing to isolate ourselves from COVID-19. More than ever we must remain connected via the internet to keep our activities afloat. It is challenging, but as Sudeep Ralhan, of Walmart Labs, said, there is “an amazing opportunity to unlearn, relearn and test our capabilities and value systems.”

With this in mind, my fellow Bahamians, as the Apostle Paul said, we must continue to endure as good soldiers. The Apostle Paul went on further to say, in another place, we must continue to endure for in due season we will reap a reward if we faint not.

Mr. Speaker, we must remain focused as a people, and we will, remain focused to collectively bring COVID-19 to an end in The Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker, may the Lord of Life our God, bless you and continue to keep you, and may He bless and keep your family, and the family of all Bahamians, and may God Almighty continue to bless and keep this great Commonwealth of The Bahamas.