



Draft Statement

**The Hon. Renward R. Wells, M.P.
Minister of Health**

COVID-19 UPDATE

**Ministry of Health
8th January, 2021
3:00 p.m.**

Good Afternoon and Happy New Year- Bahamas!

Deep gratitude is extended to Almighty God for helping us to see another year. I believe that this year, 2021, will be a momentous year of renewal, of Hope realized and prosperity in abundance; I speak it through the eyes of Faith. The year 2020 is now history, it was a year of infamy and a year in which the Bahamas rose to meet the challenge presented by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

For 2021, we encourage all Bahamians to create positive moments and opportunities. May we remember the lessons learned from the previous year, while we remain optimistic about our future.

We began last year with many unknowns about a novel coronavirus. This year we have more knowledge, and knowledge is power to navigate our destiny.

Here is the latest national COVID-19 Report.

On Thursday, the 7th January, 2021, there were 10 newly confirmed cases of COVID-19. This brought the total number of confirmed cases in The Bahamas to 7,969.

Total COVID-19 hospitalizations currently continue on a downward trend and now stand at 11 from 15 on January 1st.

Currently, there are no COVID-19 patients hospitalized in the Grand Bahama Health Care System.

In New Providence, there are 4 hospitalized COVID-19 patients at Doctor's Hospital. 4 are moderately ill and there are no patients in the Intensive Care Unit.

There are 2 moderately ill COVID-19 patients being treated at the South Beach Acute Care and Referral Centre.

At the Princess Margaret Hospital, there are 5 moderately ill patients with COVID-19. No patients are in ICU at PMH at this time.

In all, there are 1429 active cases, and 16 persons have been recently classified as recovered from COVID-19. This brings the total number of recoveries to 6313, for a recovery rate of 79.2%.

Fortunately, there were no deaths confirmed yesterday. The total number of confirmed COVID-19 deaths now stands at 175. Non-COVID related deaths are at 37. Fifteen deaths remain under investigation. One COVID-19 death, to us in the Ministry of Health is

one too many. As Minister I continue to pray for the families, across our archipelago, who have lost love ones to this pandemic. Let us pause for a moment to remember our loved ones and friends that were lost in 2020 (moment of silence).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A total of 54,244 RTPCR tests have been carried out for COVID-19. 402 tests were performed yesterday, with 10 positives and 387 negatives. 3 tests were repeated to determine recoveries.

It is noteworthy to mention for the first time we are seeing COVID-19 cases in San Salvador. The total number of cases in that island currently stands at 7.

Again we thank our healthcare and essential workers for continually and devotedly performing their duties on the frontlines. It is because of your professionalism, sacrifice and dedicated service, under the guidance of Almighty GOD, that has brought us this far. Please be assured that your works have not gone unnoticed. We applaud you for your consistent diligence.

Ladies and Gentleman,

The Ministry of Health was concerned that some Bahamians may have chosen to travel during the Thanksgiving season of November 2020. We know that Bahamians like to shop. Many have the custom to travel to the United States to take advantage of the annual Black Friday sales. It is noteworthy to mention that on the 9th and 10th December, 2020, which marks the end of the 14 day incubation period for COVID-19 after Thanksgiving Day, we did see a spike in newly confirmed cases. 38 cases were reported on 9th December, 2020, and 25 cases were reported on the 10th December, 2020. Since then, The Bahamas has experienced a low number of newly confirmed cases ranging from 4 to 19.

This outcome was made possible because of our travelling protocols. The use of the gold standard of the RTPCR test to evaluate travellers before coming to The Bahamas has proven to be most effective. Further, our surveillance activities have ensured follow-up testing after traveling outside the country. Quick isolation of those who have fallen ill has reduced the spread of the virus. Additionally, mandating travellers to purchase travel insurance has created easier

access to immediate healthcare and medical evacuation, this ensuring non-residents who become ill with COVID-19 do not become a burden to the local healthcare system.

We owe the Bahamian public a debt of gratitude for continually adhering to the preventative measures. It is because of your discipline we saw low numbers for the Thanksgiving season, and we are experiencing low numbers of newly confirmed cases right now. Let us all remain vigilant, and continue to demonstrate responsible behaviour.

Remember, remember to –

- wear your masks in stores, at work, around family members and friends;
- disinfect grocery trolleys, baskets and purchased items brought into your home;
- use hand sanitizer when you enter and exit the stores;
- maintain 6 feet from others in your space;
- wash your hands frequently, and remind your children to do the same;
- make in-person circles smaller;

- move to outdoor spaces when possible; and
- use technological abilities to enhance and maintain your relationships with family and friends virtually.

On behalf of the Ministry of Health, I say thank you for adapting to this new way of interacting. As the world continues to fight COVID-19, the methods may differ, but the commonality remains the same – the application of the preventative measures. Your continued adherence to these measures now can and will determine our national circumstances later.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now that COVID-19 vaccines have been produced, the Government of the Bahamas is working on all fronts to secure the vaccines. Currently, there are 3 authorized COVID-19 vaccines on the world market:

- Pfizer-BioNtech;
- Moderna; and
- Oxford University-AstraZeneca.

There are over 200 other COVID-19 vaccines in pre-clinical or clinical development. Given the global impact of the pandemic, scientists have been working carefully and systematically to produce safe, effective vaccines.

Through the COVAX Facility and with the assistance of the World Health and Pan American Health Organizations, The Bahamas has presumptively secured enough doses to vaccinate 20% of our population once available.

The Government of the Bahamas assures its citizens and residents that the vaccines chosen for use will be safe and appropriate for distribution throughout our islands.

To facilitate this distribution a National COVID-19 Vaccine Strategic Plan has already been approved by Cabinet. A COVID-19 Vaccine National Consultative Committee has been established, by the **Prime Minister**, to safely introduce the COVID-19 vaccine in The Bahamas.

This Committee will give advice to the Ministry of Health's National Immunization Coordinating Committee (NICC) and the

National Immunization Technical Working Group (NITWG). Be assured, Government's objective remains the same - to continually provide free vaccines, to all who wish to benefit from the protection that vaccination offers. Again, let me state the policy of the Government of the Bahamas, The COVID-19 Vaccine will be given without charge to the Bahamian people and uptake of this vaccine, by the Bahamian people, will be completely voluntary.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Within the past two weeks, new variants of COVID-19 have been announced in the United Kingdom and South Africa. The variations to the virus are associated with increased transmissibility. Greater transmissibility means that more people can become –

- infected;
- hospitalized; or
- die from the disease.

Current data is limited. It is also unknown how the variants will affect the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines. There is no current evidence to suggest this variant will not respond to the COVID-19 vaccine, but

research is ongoing. It is important to note that it is natural for viruses to mutate.

This variant has been recorded in over thirty (30) countries. Our neighbour the United States, confirmed reports of the variant in New York and Florida. With ongoing global travel, the potential for a new variant of the disease to appear in The Bahamas is a reality.

In anticipation of a possible third wave, maybe with the new variant in the mix, -

- the Ministry of Health's Surveillance team continues to monitor our in-country virus trends;
- the quarantine facility remains activated;
- contacting tracing is ongoing;
- hospital bed capacity is ready;
- PPE inventory and laboratory testing supplies are being replenished; and
- vaccine distribution plans are feverishly being implemented.

Worldwide there is a limited supply of available COVID-19 vaccines. This predicament, unfortunately, invites many unscrupulous and dishonest persons to prey on the fears and concerns of others by providing and selling counterfeit vaccines. Falsification, theft, and illegal advertising or sale of COVID-19 vaccines is a crime, and we will be closely monitoring our national landscape to ensure that this does not happen!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I implore you to take heed. **DO NOT** purchase COVID-19 vaccines online or from any informal market, such as “the back of a car.” When a safe and effective vaccine is available in the country, the public will be informed and invited to receive the vaccine in specific groups, at no cost. The vaccine will be made available at our Government Clinics and multiple other Ministry of Health approved facilities for ease of access and quick roll-out.

Although most recent conversations have centred around COVID-19 vaccines, I would like to once again remind the general public, especially our ‘precious pearls’ and parents of young children,

that routine immunizations remain extremely important and must be continued, especially during this time of COVID-19.

It took many years for The Bahamas to get rid of infections such as polio, mumps and measles. So it is important to keep up to date with your child's immunization schedule so that they remain protected from vaccine preventable diseases.

Even adults who have not received all of their immunizations should complete their immunization schedule at any Government healthcare facility at no cost. The National Immunization Schedule is on the Ministry of Health website for ease of reference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we embark on our journey through 2021, we recommend that Bahamians not be consumed with the COVID-19 "infodemic." COVID-19 infodemic is an overload of both accurate and inaccurate information about the disease. The potential for facts to become skewed by rumours, half-truths and fears make it difficult to know if the information circulating is factual.

Our Government websites, World Health and Pan American Health Organizations, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) are some of the agencies that offer credible, scientific information about health matters. I encourage you to visit these sites for updated global information. I also urge you to be a responsible digital sharer of health information. No matter how credible the information may look - perform a quick fact check to ensure that you are providing information to your loved ones that is truly accurate and credible.

My Fellow Bahamians and Residents,

As we continue to engage in our daily routines please remember that following the health preventative measures can greatly decrease your risk of acquiring any form of COVID-19. May joy and peace be yours in abundance, and may the Lord of Life, God Almighty, continue to bless this great Commonwealth of The Bahamas.