

PAHO



Pan American
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Americas

News release

PAHO seeks to strengthen preparedness and response to future respiratory virus pandemics in Latin America and the Caribbean

During a regional workshop in Argentina, the Director of PAHO called for countries to increase investment in epidemic and pandemic preparedness, because the question is not "if there will be a new pandemic, but when".

Buenos Aires, 17 August 2022 (PAHO) – With the aim of supporting countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to develop or update their operational plans to face future pandemics, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is holding a regional workshop on preparedness and response to events with pandemic and epidemic potential in Buenos Aires this week. This workshop will build on the lessons learned from COVID-19.

"As we meet today, we continue to deal with the current COVID-19 pandemic and, at the same time, we are facing an outbreak of Monkeypox in several countries," said PAHO Director Carissa F. Etienne. COVID-19, she said, "has been a formidable challenge" and "a stark reminder of the responsibility we all have to invest in prevention, preparedness and response to communicable pathogen events".

Dr. Etienne highlighted that, as of last Wednesday, there were 170 million cases and nearly 3 million deaths due to COVID-19 in the Americas. She noted that other respiratory pathogens are re-emerging, and that seasonal influenza causes between 290,000 and 650,000 deaths each year in the region. "We must never forget that it is not a question of whether a pandemic will occur due to a new influenza virus, but when it will occur," she warned.

"Our capacity to respond to health emergencies depends on what we have done before they occur and what we have learned during previous emergencies" such as COVID-19, said the PAHO Director during the opening of the workshop, which brings together technical experts in epidemiology, laboratory, immunization and risk communication

from the ministries of Health of Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Suriname.

A preparedness and response plan for events with epidemic and pandemic potential is one of the core capacities required by the International Health Regulations (IHR), a legally binding international convention adopted by Member States of the World Health Organization (WHO) to prevent and respond to public health threats that can cross borders and affect populations around the world.

"Functioning health systems are the foundation of health security," asserted Dr. Etienne and it is essential to "secure supply chains of vaccines, medicines, laboratory reagents, personal protective equipment and other strategic public health goods" before the next emergency occurs, and "strengthen the resilience of health systems with human resources and planning."

The PAHO Director recalled that two centers in Argentina and Brazil were designated by WHO for the future development and production of vaccines using mRNA technology, something that is expected to improve timely and equitable access to vaccines in the region and contribute to health self-sufficiency. "All of this is key for us to be prepared to respond and succeed during emergencies that threaten our region," she stressed.

The Minister of Health of Argentina, Carla Vizzotti, considered that the COVID-19 pandemic showed that health "must be a priority for everyone" because "without health one cannot study, work or produce". After indicating that the government had to reformulate its response to the pandemic, Vizzotti said that the region must tackle the challenges around access to medical supplies -something learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, and "think about how we can produce and expand access to vaccines."

Reflecting on the countries' response to the emergency, Vizzotti stated that "we were able to do many things in a very short time. We must look back to see what we learned, but also look forward in order to make improvements and take action that will better position us for the next pandemic".

"The COVID-19 pandemic is not over yet," said the PAHO Representative in Argentina, Eva Jané Llopis, and added that since the declaration of the public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020, "the response had to be adjusted, to seek funding and involve other sectors" due to its great scope and duration. "Reflecting on what we did, taking it to the level of strategies, and thinking about other epidemiological challenges is crucial to continue moving forward," she said.

PAHO expects to hold similar workshops with other countries in the region during

2022. The outputs of this and other workshops will integrate the vision of the Americas region into global pandemic preparedness and response documents and guidelines.

Links

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The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its population. Founded in 1902, it is the world's oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas and is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American system.