



## Despite overall drop in new infections this week, pandemic continues to challenge health care workers in the Americas

*PAHO warns that recent surge in COVID-19 cases has overburdened struggling systems. Countries must urgently increase staff and training and prioritize health care workers for vaccination.*



**Washington D.C., 9 February 2022 (PAHO)** – While cases of COVID-19 fell by a third in the Americas this week, health care workers continue to face challenging conditions due to systems that are unprepared to support them, the Pan American Health Organization Director Carissa F. Etienne said during a media briefing today.

“When cases surge exponentially, as they have in the past few weeks,

the burden falls mostly on the people that power our health systems,” Dr. Etienne said. “For them, there is nothing mild about this Omicron wave.”

With infections reaching 4.8 million (a 31% drop from last week) but 33,000 new deaths, the PAHO Director said that the region remains in the grip of the latest COVID-19 wave and urged countries to harness the lessons learned from the pandemic so far as clinics and hospitals once again become full.

“Years of underinvestment in our health services, aging information systems and poor labor conditions made our health workers’ jobs challenging,” the Director said, highlighting that these disadvantages were only exacerbated by COVID-19.

A PAHO study launched this week shows that over the course of the pandemic, doctors, nurses, and other frontline health workers saw more patients, worked longer hours, and suffered higher rates of COVID-19 infection.

In some countries, such as Ecuador and Bolivia, more than 10% of health care workers got COVID-19, and many others lacked access to sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE).

This has led to “elevated rates of depressive symptoms, suicidal thinking, and psychological distress,” the Director said.

Ensuring access to PPE and prioritizing health care workers for vaccination are critical to addressing these issues and enabling them to do their jobs safely.

“Now more than ever, we must ensure health workers are protected with lifesaving COVID-19 vaccines and receive priority for vaccine boosters, where available,” Dr. Etienne said.

The Director cited policies like hazard pay and life insurance, as well as regular testing, and transitioning pregnant and older staff to telemedicine work, as strategies countries can apply to protect health care workers.

“Investing in our health workforce should not be something countries only do during an emergency,” she said, adding that an investment in our health workforce is “an investment in all of us.”

Turning to the COVID-19 situation in the region, the PAHO Director said one trend stands out: “Countries with higher vaccination coverage are seeing lower ICU admissions and deaths.”

She also reported that in North America, new infections and deaths decreased in all three countries.

Infections are also slowing down in Central and South America, but deaths continue to rise in these areas. Hospitalizations are also rising in most Southern Cone countries.

In the Caribbean, with the exceptions of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Dominica, which has seen a spike in new infections, cases have begun to slow down. Deaths, however, continue to climb.

## **Links**

### [Director’s Remarks](#)

[Conferencia de prensa de la OPS sobre COVID-19 / PAHO’s Press Briefing on COVID-19 - AUDIO ORIGINAL](#)

[PAHO Press Briefing on COVID19 - AUDIO ENGLISH](#)

[Coletiva de Imprensa OPAS - COVID-19 - AUDIO PORTUGUÊS](#)

[Conférence de Presse COVID-19 – AUDIO FRANÇAIS](#)

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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.