

## **PAHO Director says preparations needed to combat effects of winter, hurricanes on COVID-19 response**

Washington, D.C., June 9, 2020 (PAHO)—The Director of the Pan American Health Organization, Carissa F. Etienne, said preparing for winter and hurricanes is critical to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the Americas.

With more than [3.3 million cases of COVID-19](#) in the region and many areas reporting exponential rises in cases and deaths, “We are concerned by data showing the virus surging in new places that had previously seen a limited number of cases,” Etienne said in a press briefing today.

The PAHO Director noted, “In South America, our response to the pandemic will be impacted by the arrival of winter, while hurricane season will complicate our efforts in North and Central America, and especially in the Caribbean.”

### **Preparing for respiratory infections during winter**

Winter, now starting in South America, “fuels respiratory infections—like seasonal influenza and pneumonia—that can rapidly spread in colder climates and as more people gather indoors to stay warm,” she said.

“This is a problem for patients because respiratory illnesses leave them at greater risk of severe COVID-19 infection. It’s also a challenge for strained health systems that will have to cope with the dual burden of a coronavirus pandemic and a spike in other respiratory illnesses. It does not help that the similar symptoms will make diagnosing COVID-19 even harder,” Dr. Etienne told journalists at the briefing.

Influenza vaccination “to prevent severe cases of flu is more critical than ever—particularly for high-risk groups like health workers, the elderly and people with chronic conditions. These same groups are also at high-risk of coronavirus infection,” she noted.

Seasonal influenza vaccination is ongoing in 14 countries, and more than 90 million people are being targeted. PAHO is helping countries buy vaccines through its Revolving Fund. “The Fund helped secure 24 million flu vaccine doses, despite the added logistical hurdles that we’re all facing in transporting essential supplies during the pandemic,” the PAHO Director explained.

## Preparing for hurricane season

With hurricane season starting, PAHO's director suggested that officials in the Caribbean, Central America, and the East coast of the USA "review national hurricane response plans and conduct simulation exercises to ensure your disaster and COVID-19 responses are aligned. We should also plan for potential disruptions to the care of critically ill patients and refine evacuation plans."

She said PAHO is working to provide emergency response supplies throughout the region, and "to secure critical facilities like laboratories, and quarantine and isolation centers so diagnosis and treatment for COVID-19 can continue even under difficult circumstances."

"We must take action today to safeguard our progress and mitigate the spread of the virus during this time. That means redoubling our efforts to control the spread of COVID-19, so that we reduce the dual burden the approaching winter and hurricane seasons might bring," Etienne added.

Strengthening health infrastructure by hiring surge staff and expanding reserves of essential supplies and protective equipment is also important and "will help ensure the work done to prepare for COVID-19 is reinforced to address these seasonal threats, she said.

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed our region to the limit. Our communities and health systems are under duress, and our collective efforts are laser-focused on containing the virus, Dr. Etienne said.

"Preparing for winter and hurricane season is a critical part of this fight. We must take action today to safeguard our progress and mitigate the spread of the virus during this time. And that means redoubling our efforts to control the spread of COVID-19, so that we reduce the dual burden the approaching winter and hurricane seasons might bring."

## LINKS

- **Remarks from the Director:** <https://www.paho.org/en/media/weekly-press-briefing-covid-19-situation-americas>
- **Recording of the media briefing (original audio):** <https://youtu.be/apd6Fz9cYI8>
- **Recording of the media briefing (English):** <https://youtu.be/80A7B-3Z8M4>
- **Information about COVID-19 in the Americas:** [www.paho.org/coronavirus](http://www.paho.org/coronavirus)

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