

Free Rapid Tests Part Of Biden's Winter COVID Strategy

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As COVID-19 cases surge in Massachusetts and around the country and scientists begin to get a better picture of a worrisome new variant circulating, President Joe Biden on Thursday laid out his strategy to control the pandemic this winter without putting new restrictions on the economy.

Biden's plan includes a push to get more people vaccinated – both children who have only recently become eligible for the shots and adults who have chosen not to get vaccinated to this point – new restrictions on international travelers, an increase in federal resources available to states experiencing a surge of coronavirus activity, and a new order making at-home rapid tests available at no cost to people with private health insurance.

“My plan I’m announcing today pulls no punches in the fight against COVID-19 and it’s a plan that, I think, should unite us. I know COVID-19 has been very divisive in this country; it has become a political issue, which is a sad, sad commentary. It shouldn’t be, but it has been,” Biden, who spoke with a strained voice and coughed a few times during his remarks, said. “Now as we move into the winter and face the challenges of this new variant, this is a moment we can put the divisiveness behind us, I hope. This is a moment we can do what we haven’t been able to do enough of through this whole pandemic – get the nation to come together, unite the nation in a common purpose to fight this virus, to protect one another, to protect our economic recovery.”

The latest strategy is being deployed as the 21-month pandemic

enters a new phase. Despite millions of Americans this year having the protection afforded by a vaccine, COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations appear to be in the early stages of a sharp increase similar to the way they exploded after Thanksgiving last year. On top of that, cases of the new Omicron mutant declared a “variant of concern” by the World Health Organization last week are now being identified around the country – though not yet in Massachusetts – while scientists race to answer questions about this strain’s transmissibility and potential to evade vaccines.

The plan that Biden laid out during a visit to the National Institutes of Health touched upon a few issues that Gov. Charlie Baker highlighted earlier this week as important to pandemic recovery efforts in Massachusetts.

Biden said he will begin requiring health insurers to cover 100 percent of the cost of at-home tests purchased by their members starting next month. The CVS website Thursday advertised at-home antigen tests for sale for \$9.99 for a single FlowFlex test or \$23.99 for a two-pack of the BinaxNOW rapid tests.

Baker expressed frustration this week that the federal government had not done enough to make at-home testing more available and affordable. The governor said he thinks “there is tremendous value in rapid tests that work as both a preventive device and a public health device and as a work and employment device.”

“In most parts of Western Europe, you can buy these for a buck on the street corner. And we have not reached the point in this country where we have that kind of supply available,” he said. “I mean, we have to fight for the supply we get currently to run our nursing home, test-and-stay program in schools, our congregate care programs, and our programs for inmates and correctional officers.”

After an event in Worcester on Thursday, Baker said he had brought up the need to do more around rapid testing “on practically every call with the White House now for months” and said he’s pleased to see it as a pillar of Biden’s winter strategy.

“I do believe the fact that he’s focused on a big, broad, and muscular distribution of rapid tests is really important to everybody,” Baker said Thursday, according to a transcript provided by his office. The governor added, “These tests have tremendous value in so many ways to help people stay [safe] and stay healthy as we head into the winter and I’m glad to see the administration, you know, put some elbow grease behind that.”

The president said 150 million Americans will be able to get their private insurer to reimburse the cost of at-home tests and people without private insurance will be able to seek out a portion of 50 million at-home tests the government will distribute to health centers and rural clinics.

There were no at-home rapid tests on the market at the start of 2020, but there are now at least eight available to consumers, the White House said. Addressing concerns about the scant availability of at-home rapid tests, the White House said that the available supply of such tests this month will be four times greater than it was late in the summer.

Separate from the federal government’s renewed vaccination push, Baker said his administration was working to increase its ability to deliver booster shots to the more than 4.8 million Bay Staters who are fully vaccinated. About 1.14 million people here have already gotten a booster, according to the Department of Public Health, but some people have reported trouble finding a convenient appointment to get the latest jab.

“Given the fact that we have far more demand now than we had a

couple of weeks ago, we're gonna see if we can increase our capacity to do more," the governor said Monday.

The Pandemic Picture in Massachusetts

The heightened demand for boosters comes as three of the four main metrics Baker's administration uses to track the pandemic are all heading in the wrong direction. The seven-day averages of new cases and hospitalizations have increased about 46 percent and 35 percent, respectively, over the last two months and the state's average positive test rate has nearly tripled.

The 4,838 new COVID-19 cases announced by DPH on Wednesday marked the highest single-day total since the 4,935 new cases announced on Jan. 22 and the 957 patients in a hospital for COVID-19 was the highest level of hospitalizations since Feb. 19 when there were 970 people hospitalized with the virus.

The seven-day average positive test rate of 5.14 percent as of Wednesday's update from DPH was the highest since Jan. 21, when an average of 5.24 percent of all COVID-19 tests were coming back positive for the virus.

Last week, as cases and hospitalizations were beginning to tick up and hospitals were weeks into a staffing shortage, the Baker administration announced that it will begin requiring hospitals to roll back non-essential and non-urgent scheduled procedures if the number of available beds at the facility is limited.

The current level of hospitalizations is quickly approaching a threshold that a key Baker administration advisor flagged months ago as an indication of stress on the state's health care system.

"I think to crest 1,000 patients in hospitals again ... does start to strain the health care resources of the commonwealth," Dr. Paul Biddinger, a Massachusetts General Hospital disaster medicine specialist who has advised the

administration on COVID-19, said in April.