

Biden Announces Deployment of 4,000 More Troops to Help Reach Vaccination Target



President Joe Biden speaks about the COVID-19 pandemic during a prime-time address from the East Room of the White House, Thursday, March 11, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik) — Military.com

WASHINGTON — One year after the nation was brought to a near-standstill by the coronavirus, President Joe Biden used his first prime-time address to outline his plan Thursday night to make all adults vaccine-eligible by May 1 and get the country “closer to normal” by the Fourth of July. He offered Americans fresh hope and appealed anew for their help.

Speaking in the White House East Room, Biden announced moves to speed vaccinations, including directing that states lift qualifications for vaccinations by May 1, and expand the number of places and categories of people who can give

shots. His aim: let Americans gather at least in small groups for the Independence Day holiday.

Biden was marking one year since the onset of the pandemic that has killed more than 530,000 Americans and disrupted the lives of countless more.

“While it was different for everyone, we all lost something,” Biden said, calling the past year “a collective suffering, a collective sacrifice.”

Biden announced that he is deploying an additional 4,000 active-duty troops to support vaccination efforts and will allow more people — such as medical students, veterinarians and dentists — to deliver shots. He is also directing more doses toward some 950 community health centers and up to 20,000 retail pharmacies, to make it easier for people to get vaccinated closer to their homes.

As supplies of the vaccines continue to increase, Biden announced that he will direct states and territories to make all adults eligible for vaccination by May 1. The U.S. is expecting delivery of enough doses for those 255 million adults by the end of that month, but the process of actually administering those doses will take time.

Even as he offers optimism, Biden made clear that the July 4 timetable requires cooperation from Americans to continue to wear face coverings, maintain social distancing and follow federal guidelines meant to slow the spread of the virus in the near term. He also called on them roll up their sleeves to get vaccinated as soon as they’re eligible.

“This is a whole of country effort,” White House chief of staff Ron Klain told CNN. “The president’s deploying our entire government to do its part. The American people are going to have to do their part, too.”

The speech came hours after Biden on Thursday signed into law a \$1.9 trillion relief package that he said will help defeat the virus, nurse the economy back to health and deliver direct aid to Americans in need. Some direct checks could begin arriving this weekend.

“This historic legislation is about rebuilding the backbone of this country,” Biden said as he signed the bill in the Oval Office.

Most noticeable to many Americans are provisions providing up to \$1,400 in

direct payments, some of which could begin landing in bank accounts this weekend and extending \$300 weekly emergency unemployment benefits into early September. Also included are expanded tax credits over the next year for children, child care, and family leave — some of the credits that Democrats have signaled they'd like to make permanent — plus spending for renters, feeding programs, and people's utility bills.

The House gave final congressional approval to the sweeping package by a near party-line 220-211 vote on Wednesday, seven weeks after Biden entered the White House and four days after the Senate passed the bill. Republicans in both chambers opposed the legislation unanimously, characterizing it as bloated, crammed with liberal policies, and heedless of signs the crises are easing.

Biden originally planned to sign the bill on Friday, but it arrived at the White House more quickly than anticipated.

"We want to move as fast as possible," tweeted chief of staff Klain.

Previewing his Thursday night remarks, Biden said he would "talk about what we've been through as a nation this past year, but more importantly, I'm going to talk about what comes next."

Biden's challenge is to honor the sacrifices made by Americans while encouraging them to remain vigilant despite "virus fatigue" and growing impatience to resume normal activities given the tantalizing promise of vaccines. Speaking on the one-year anniversary of the World Health Organization's declaration of a pandemic, he'll mourn the dead, but also project optimism about the future.

"This is a chance for him to really beam into everybody's living rooms and to be both the mourner in chief and to explain how he's leading the country out of this," said presidential historian and Rice University professor Douglas Brinkley.

"This is a big moment," Brinkley added. "He's got to win over hearts and minds for people to stay masked and get vaccinated, but also recognize that after the last year, the federal government hasn't forgotten you."

Biden's evening remarks in the East Room are central to a pivotal week for the president as he addresses the defining challenge of his term: shepherding the nation through the twin public health and economic storms brought about by the

virus.

On Monday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released initial guidance for how vaccinated people can resume some normal activities. On Wednesday, Congress approved the president's \$1.9 trillion "American Rescue Plan," aimed at easing the economic impact of the virus on tens of millions of people. And the nation was on pace to administer its 100 millionth dose of vaccine as soon as Thursday.

Almost exactly one year ago, President Donald Trump addressed the nation to mark the WHO's declaration of a global pandemic. He announced travel restrictions and called for Americans to practice good hygiene but displayed little alarm about the forthcoming catastrophe. Trump, it was later revealed, acknowledged that he had been deliberately "playing down" the threat of the virus.

For Biden, who has promised to level with the American public after the alternate reality of Trump's virus talk, the imperative is to strike the correct balance "between optimism and grief," said Princeton history professor and presidential scholar Julian Zelizer.

"Generally, the country likes optimism, and at this particular moment they're desperate for optimism, but you can't risk a 'Mission Accomplished' moment," he said, warning against any premature declaration that the threat has been vanquished.

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<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/03/11/biden-announces-deployment-of-4000-more-troops-help-reach-vaccination-target.html>

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