

US cuts off free COVID-19 rapid testing

As infections mount, an end to all pandemic protection measures looms

Patrick Martin
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The Biden administration confirmed Monday that it will “pause” its program to send millions of Americans free rapid antigen test kits through the mail at the end of this week. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) made the brief announcement on its website, blaming Congress for failing to provide the necessary funds.

In addition to an end to postal delivery of free kits, the administration will stop free testing in schools, homeless shelters, shelters for victims of domestic violence and prisons. Children and the poorest and most oppressed sections of the working class will be “flying blind” into conditions of a spreading pandemic with new and likely more infectious and lethal variants of SARS-CoV-2.

The HHS will conserve the relatively small number of test kits that remain, planning to distribute them in the fall when a new upsurge in COVID-19 infections is expected, agency officials said. In other words, while the number of free test kits goes down to zero, the number of cases of infection will rise significantly.

Under the program established last January, every American could request a total of 16 free test kits through a federal government portal. Free testing will now be limited to state and federal government “pop-up” test sites and to those who have private insurance plans that cover that service.

The HHS action is only one of many steps being taken by the White House to shut down all efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and give the virus free rein to do its deadly work. Under slogans like “learning to live with the virus,” the Biden administration has fully adopted the mass infection policy of the Trump administration that came before it.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Blum recently wrote that the Department of Health and Human Services is preparing to bring an end to the Public Health Emergency (PHE) first declared in 2020 in the initial stages of the pandemic, even

though infections, hospitalizations and deaths are at far higher levels. He wrote: “In the meantime, CMS encourages healthcare providers to prepare for the end of these flexibilities as soon as possible and to begin moving forward to reestablishing previous health and safety standards and billing practices.”

Masking is gone, social distancing is gone, contact tracing is gone, lockdowns and remote schooling are gone, rapid testing is going. Schools are reopening this month to full-scale in-person education, with overcrowded classrooms serving as Petri dishes for mass infection and the development of new and more dangerous variants.

The terrible consequences of this policy have already been demonstrated. Under Trump, 400,000 Americans died of COVID-19. Under Biden, another 670,000 have died, with the cumulative death toll expected to pass 1.2 million in the fall. All these figures are likely to be significant undercounts. On a world scale, while the World Health Organization officially tallies the dead at 6.5 million, published estimates by such conservative sources as *The Economist* magazine place the global death toll at more than 20 million.

The HHS statement and innumerable White House declarations have sought to place the blame for the end of free testing on Congress, and particularly on the intransigent opposition to further COVID-19 funding on the part of the 50 Republicans in the US Senate. They have blocked passage of additional COVID-19 funding to pay for the purchase of test kits, prophylactic treatments like Pfizer’s Paxlovid, and new vaccines, modified to deal with new mutations of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2.

This is a transparent effort to cover up the decision by both capitalist parties to allow all COVID-19 funding to expire. Biden and Senate Democratic leaders repeatedly slashed the amount of COVID-19 funding, which they had paired in the same legislation as additional military aid to Ukraine to ensure its passage. Eventually, in the course of protracted

wrangling in the Senate, the Democrats dropped the COVID-19 portion of the bill entirely, passed the Ukraine military aid, a whopping \$40 billion, and then claimed they had been unable to overcome Republican objections.

Then a different legislative vehicle, the so-called Inflation Reduction Act, became available, providing more than \$400 billion in funding for Medicare and climate change alleviation. This was immune from a Republican filibuster because it was enacted through budget “reconciliation,” a once-a-year process that requires only 50 votes. But Senate Democratic leaders and the White House declined to incorporate COVID-19 funding into the bill.

White House COVID-19 response coordinator Dr. Ashish Jha has made it clear that the Biden administration is dropping any pretense of fighting the pandemic as it surges in the fall. Speaking at a US Chamber of Commerce function this month, he said, “One of the things we’ve spent a lot of time thinking about in the last many months, and we’re going to continue this work, and you’ll hear more from the administration on this, is getting us out of that acute emergency phase where the U.S. government is buying the vaccines, buying the treatments, buying the diagnostic tests.”

He added, “My hope is that in 2023, you’re going to see the commercialization of almost all of these products. Some of that is actually going to begin this fall, in the days and weeks ahead.”

No doubt his business audience was appreciative of the decision to turn over pandemic testing, vaccination and prophylactic treatment to the private sector, giving pharmaceutical companies and health care providers a guaranteed market of tens of millions of people. Those who can afford to pay, either out of pocket or through insurance, will provide a lucrative source for profits. Those who cannot afford to pay—the very people who are old, poor and sick and most vulnerable to COVID-19—will do without, perhaps paying instead with their lives or health.

Even those who can afford to pay may find the needed vaccines and tests unavailable. Without the federal government providing a guaranteed buyer for billions of doses of vaccines, and providing the funds to finance the massive costs of developing, conducting trials and bringing the products to market, Pfizer, BioNTech, Moderna and other pharmaceutical companies could not have developed the original vaccines so quickly.

The dwindling of federal support for new vaccines and new tests is already being felt, hampering efforts to develop modified vaccines to keep up with the new variants and subvariants generated by the uncontrolled spread of a highly adaptable virus. The funds currently allocated would pay for new boosters for only half the US population, and the

trendline is going down, not up.

Ultimately, the pharmaceutical industry, on the basis of market considerations, not the imperative to save every life, will develop only those medicines and treatments that are profitable, regardless of how many millions are excluded—not only in the United States but around the world.

Only the intervention of the working class can prevent such a horrific outcome to a world-historic public health crisis. As the resolution adopted earlier this month by the Seventh National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party declares:

The two alternatives posed before mankind are either unending mass infection, debilitation and death, or the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and implementation of a policy of global elimination, to end all human-to-human transmission of SARS-CoV-2. The strategy of elimination requires the universal deployment of every weapon in the arsenal of measures to combat the virus, including mass vaccination, testing, isolation and contact tracing, along with the temporary shutdown of schools and non-essential production, with full income to workers and support for small businesses. The experience in China, where popular support for the Zero-COVID elimination strategy has allowed the authorities to repeatedly suppress outbreaks, demonstrates in practice both that elimination is possible and that it must be expanded worldwide.



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