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Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, July 15, 2021

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:05 P.M. EDT

MS. PSAKI: Hi, everyone. We have another special guest today. Doesn't sing as well as our guest from yesterday — (laughter) — but very knowledgeable.

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Definitely don't ask me to sing.

MS. PSAKI: (Laughs.) Today, we have a special guest, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. The Surgeon General has been one of our leading voices on public health in the administration, in particular around the COVID-19 response.

Today, he published an advisory on health misinformation as an urgent public health crisis, and he is here to talk more about this issue and take a few of your questions.

With that, I will turn it over.

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Hello, everyone. How are you?

Q Good, thank you.

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: It's nice to see you all today. And thank you, Jen, for that very kind introduction.

As all of you know, we've come a long way in our fight against COVID-19, and we've come a long way thanks to the efforts of many, many people across

communities in the United States.

But right now, we are seeing COVID deaths markedly down from their peak in January. We have 160 million people who have been fully vaccinated. And hundreds of thousands of people each day are choosing to get vaccinated. That is all good news.

But we are not out of the woods yet. Millions of Americans are still not protected against COVID-19, and we are seeing more infections among those who are unvaccinated. And that's why I want to talk to you today about one of the biggest obstacles that's preventing us from ending this pandemic.

Today, I issued a Surgeon General's Advisory on the dangers of health misinformation. Surgeon General Advisories are reserved for urgent public health threats. And while those threats have often been related to what we eat, drink, and smoke, today we live in a world where misinformation poses an imminent and insidious threat to our nation's health.

Health misinformation is false, inaccurate, or misleading information about health, according to the best evidence at the time. And while it often appears innocuous on social media apps and retail sites or search engines, the truth is that misinformation takes away our freedom to make informed decisions about our health and the health of our loved ones.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health misinformation has led people to resist wearing masks in high-risk settings. It's led them to turn down proven treatments and to choose not to get vaccinated. This has led to avoidable illnesses and death. Simply put, health [mis]information has cost us lives.

Now, health misinformation didn't start with COVID-19. What's different now though is the speed and scale at which health misinformation is spreading. Modern technology companies have enabled misinformation to poison our information environment with little accountability to their users. They've allowed people who intentionally spread misinformation — what we call “disinformation” — to have extraordinary reach.

They've designed product features, such as “Like” buttons, that reward us for sharing emotionally-charged content, not accurate content. And their

algorithms tend to give us more of what we click on, pulling us deeper and deeper into a well of misinformation.

Now, we need an all-of-society approach to fight misinformation. And that's why this advisory that I issued today has recommendations for everyone.

First, we include recommendations for individuals and families. We ask people to raise the bar for sharing health information by checking sources before they share, to ensure that information is backed by credible, scientific sources. As we say in the advisory, "If you're not sure, don't share."

Second, we're asking health organizations to proactively address misinformation with their patients. Today, the American Academy of Pediatrics is announcing an educational campaign to help parents navigate online health information. I'm encouraged to see this commitment. And, again, this is just the beginning.

Third, we're asking educational institutions to help improve health information literacy.

We're asking researchers and foundations as well to help us learn more about how health [mis]information spreads and how to stop it.

Today, the Rockefeller Foundation is announcing a \$13.5 million commitment to counter health misinformation. The Digital Public Library of America is announcing that they will convene a set of librarians, scholars, journalists, and civic leaders to confront health misinformation together.

Fourth, we're saying we expect more from our technology companies. We're asking them to operate with greater transparency and accountability. We're asking them to monitor misinformation more closely. We're asking them to consistently take action against misinformation super-spreaders on their platforms.

Fifth, we're also asking news organizations to proactively address the public's questions without inadvertently giving a platform to health misinformation that can harm their audiences.

And sixth, we know that government can play an important role too by investing in research, by bringing individuals and organizations together to address misinformation, and by supporting groups that are working on this issue.

On a personal note, it's painful for me to know that nearly every death we are seeing now from COVID-19 could have been prevented. I say that as someone who has lost 10 family members to COVID and who wishes each and every day that they had had the opportunity to get vaccinated.

I say that also as a concerned father of two young children who aren't yet eligible for the vaccine, but I know that our kids are depending on all of us to get vaccinated to shield them from this virus.

Every week, I talk to doctors and nurses across our country who are burning out as they care for more and more patients with COVID-19 who never got vaccinated — all too often because they were misled by misinformation.

We must confront misinformation as a nation. Every one of us has the power and the responsibility to make a difference in this fight. Lives are depending on it.

You can read the full advisory at [SurgeonGeneral.gov/HealthMisinformation](https://www.surgeongeneral.gov/HealthMisinformation).

And I hope that you will see it as I do — as a starting point from which we can build a healthier information environment, safeguard our nation against future threats, and ultimately, empower people to lead healthier lives.

Thanks so much for your time. And I'll turn it to Jen.

MS. PSAKI: Andrea.

Q Andrea Shalal with Reuters. I wanted to ask you whether you see any evidence at all that the misinformation or disinformation that you're seeing comes from any nefarious sources. Are you seeing some structures behind the scenes that point to who or what might be behind them? We've seen Russian disinformation in the past. We've seen, kind of, that hybrid warfare. Are you seeing any indication that there could be nation states behind this

disinformation?

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Well, Andrea, thank you for the question. The misinformation that we're seeing comes from multiple sources. Yes, there is disinformation that is coming from bad actors. But what is also important to point out is that much of the misinformation that is circulating online is often coming from individuals who don't have bad intentions, but who are unintentionally sharing information that they think might be helpful.

And that's why, in this advisory, we make it very clear that among the things we're asking individuals to do is to pause before they share, to check sources. And if they're not sure if a source is credible, to not share. You know, one of the things we have said, again, is that when it comes to misinformation, not sharing is caring — unlike what many of our moms taught us earlier in life. (Laughter.)

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead, Kaitlan.

Q Thank you very much. Surgeon General, is misinformation the number one reason why people are not getting vaccinated?

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Well, Kaitlan, it's one of several reasons why people are not getting vaccinated, but it's a very important one because what we know from polls, Kaitlan, is that two thirds of people who are not vaccinated either believe common myths about the COVID-19 vaccine or think some of those myths might be true. Myths like, "You can get COVID from the vaccine," which is absolutely not true. So we know that it's not the only driver that's leading people not to be vaccinated, but it is a very important one.

Q And do you personally believe that public figures and public companies that are helping spread misinformation about the vaccine should be held accountable?

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Well, I think in a moment like this when we see misinformation literally costing us our loved ones, costing us lives, all of us have to ask: How we can be more accountable and responsible for the

information that we share?

And those of us who may have larger platforms, I think bear a greater responsibility to think about that. But the bottom line is all of us have an important role here to play, and technology companies have a particularly important role.

We know that the dramatic increase in the speed — speed and scale of spreading misinformation has, in part, been enabled by these platforms. So that's why in this advisory today, we are asking them to step up. We know they have taken some steps to address misinformation, but much, much more has to be done. And we can't wait longer for them to take aggressive action because it's costing people their lives.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead in the middle, and then Rachel. And then, unfortunately, he has to go. Go ahead.

Q So, the reality is a lot of the health misinformation you were citing came from this lectern last year. I mean, what do you think the best approach is to counter or deal with misinformation that comes from public officials — people in position of authority?

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Well, what I would say is that when it comes to determining what is accurate, in terms of health information, science has to guide us. And the good news is that we have credible science individuals in our country. We have doctors and nurses in communities. We have public health departments and the CDC. We have medical schools, nursing schools, and healthcare institutions.

These should be our sources of credibility when it comes to evaluating whether information is true or not. I think one of the greatest roles that public leaders can play is to point to scientists and to credible sources and have them speak directly to the public.

I'll note for you that that's one thing that this administration has done is work hard to put science, scientists, and healthcare professionals in front of cameras to — having to speak directly to the public. That's what we have to do more of.

The problem right now is that the voices of these credible health professionals are getting drowned out, and that's one of the reasons we are asking technology companies to help lift up the voices of credible health authorities. It's also why they have to do more to reduce the misinformation that's out there so that the true voices of experts can shine through.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead, Rachel.

Q Thank you so much for taking my question. So are there specific elected leaders that you believe are part of the problem with pushing this misinformation?

And we had an ABC News-Washington Post poll that showed that 93 percent of Democrats say they're vaccinated or will be vaccinated, but only 49 percent of Republicans say the same. So, how do you break through to the people who may be trusting some of these elected leaders that are pushing, maybe, some of this misinformation more than they actually trust members of your administration?

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Well, thanks, Rachel. You know, I think about this as I — as I think about doctoring, and as I think about my approach to patients, which is: I recognize that each patient that I was blessed to care for is an individual, you know, regardless of what their political affiliation or their past may be. They're an individual and I — my goal was to understand what their needs and desires were, what their values were, and then to help them improve their health.

We have to take a similar approach here when it comes to reaching people with information about COVID-19 and the vaccine. We've got to recognize that sometimes the most trusted voices are not the ones that had the most followers on social media or are the ones that have the most, you know, name recognition. Sometimes the most trusted sources are a mother or father or a faith leader or a local doctor or a nurse, and that's why, to reach people with accurate information, what we have to do is partner with those local trusted voices.

That's why, in this advisory, one of the things that we point out an important

role for government is to support local organizations, including healthcare professionals, so that they can get out there and speak directly to people and share that information.

These public health efforts move at the speed of trust, and we have to recognize where trust is — you know, where those relationships are — invest in them, support them, so that people can ultimately get the information they need to improve their health.

MS. PSAKI: Thank you so much for joining us.

Q Jen, I have a follow-up for —

MS. PSAKI: Thank you.

Q — the Surgeon General on —

MS. PSAKI: I think he has to go, unfortunately. Thank you so much.

SURGEON GENERAL MURTHY: Thank you so much, Jen. Thanks, everyone.

MS. PSAKI: Okay, I think we're getting ready to start the briefing. I think everybody has a lot of questions. So why don't you —

Q (Inaudible.) You never —

MS. PSAKI: We — we are going to proceed with the briefing, and then we're happy to take lots of questions in the room.

Okay. So, unemployment claims, which you all saw the data come out this morning — today's data on new unemployment claims is further proof that the President's economic plan is working.

Today marked another new pandemic low in initial unemployment claims — the lowest level since March of 2020. And the four-week average of new claims continued to decline, dropping to its lowest level in 16 months — down 55 percent since when President Biden took office.

This is evidence of the strengthening labor market we're seeing across the economy: Unemployment is down, wages are up, and three million new jobs have been created in five months — the fastest rate in U.S. history.

We just gave you a few headlines over here, just in case you haven't read all of your own coverage. (Laughter.)

And because of the President's Rescue Plan and his work curbing the pandemic, the United States is expected to return to full employment by next year instead of 2024, which was the projection when the President first took office.

Another piece of news today: We heard the President, of course, announce today that \$15 billion in Child Tax Credit payments were distributed to tens of millions of families, covering 60 million children. Working families will receive these payments on the 15th of every single month for the next year thanks to the American Rescue Plan.

Eighty-six percent of American families will receive their payment by direct deposit. It will show up in their bank accounts as "Child CTC." Others will receive their check in the mail today or in the next few days.

And just as a reminder: The American Rescue Plan is providing the largest-ever Child Tax Credit. And this is a historic increase that will provide middle-class families with critical tax relief. And many project it will help cut the child poverty rate in half.

I have a little update for all of you on ransomware, as well as vaccines. And then we'll get to your questions.

In April, the President directed agencies to take aggressive action to counter the ransomware threat at home and abroad. We have coordinated these efforts, regularly convening an interagency task force that drives coordinated whole-of-government action to counter ransomware. Participation spans the whole government including law enforcement, the intelligence community, center risk management agencies, regulators, and other national security agencies.

Today, as a part of our ongoing ransomware efforts, the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Treasury, and State announced new resources and initiatives to protect American businesses and communities from ransomware attacks.

Those include: The Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice launched StopRansomware.gov, a coordinated, federal government, one-stop resource for public- and private-sector organizations to reduce their risk of ransomware attacks.

The Department of Treasury announced a FinCEN exchange on ransomware to discuss efforts by the public and private sectors to increase targeted information sharing and analysis, and pursue criminal actors and networks that engage in such attacks.

And the Department of State announced it will offer up to \$10 million in rewards for information leading to the identification or location of any person engaged in state-sponsored, malicious cyber activities.

This is a part of our ongoing efforts and our ongoing work of our interagency process that is a new — a newer initiative in this administration.

Finally, last night, Haiti received 500,000 doses of COVID-19 Moderna vaccines donated by the United States through the COVAX facility. And we will send a significant amount of additional doses to Haiti soon, in consultation with local health authorities.

The embassy in Haiti has worked closely with Haitian health — the heal- — Haitian Health Ministry, Pan American Health Organization, and UNICEF to ensure that these vaccines arrive safely and securely, and that they are also distributed equitably and without interference to the people who need them most.

We remain, of course, a partner of the Haitian people in building a more stable and secure Haiti, including in its fight against COVID-19.

Go ahead, Alex.

Q Thanks, Jen. Can you talk a little bit more about this request for tech companies to be more aggressive in policing misinformation? Has the administration been in touch with any of these companies and are there any actions that the federal government can take to ensure their cooperation, because we've seen, from the start, there's not a lot of action on some of these platforms.

MS. PSAKI: Sure. Well, first, we are in regular touch with these social media platforms, and those engagements typically happen through members of our senior staff, but also members of our COVID-19 team, given, as Dr. Murthy conveyed, this is a big issue of misinformation, specifically on the pandemic.

In terms of actions, Alex, that we have taken — or we're working to take, I should say — from the federal government: We've increased disinformation research and tracking within the Surgeon General's office. We're flagging problematic posts for Facebook that spread disinformation. We're working with doctors and medical professionals to connect — to connect medical experts with popular — with popular — who are popular with their audiences with — with accurate information and boost trusted content. So we're helping get trusted content out there.

We also created the COVID-19 — the COVID Community Corps to get factual information into the hands of local messengers, and we're also investing, as you all have seen in the President's, the Vice President's, and Dr. Fauci's time in meeting with influencers who also have large reaches to a lot of these target audiences who can spread and share accurate information.

You saw an example of that yesterday. I believe that video will be out Fri- — tomorrow. I think that was your question, Steve, yesterday; I did a full follow-up there.

There are also proposed changes that we have made to social media platforms, including Facebook, and those specifically are four key steps.

One, that they measure and publicly share the impact of misinformation on their platform. Facebook should provide, publicly and transparently, data on the reach of COVID-19 — COVID vaccine misinformation. Not just engagement, but the reach of the misinformation and the audience that it's

reaching.

That will help us ensure we're getting accurate information to people. This should be provided not just to researchers, but to the public so that the public knows and understands what is accurate and inaccurate.

Second, that we have recommended — proposed that they create a robust enforcement strategy that bridges their properties and provides transparency about the rules. So, about — I think this was a question asked before — there's about 12 people who are producing 65 percent of anti-vaccine misinformation on social media platforms. All of them remain active on Facebook, despite some even being banned on other platforms, including Facebook — ones that Facebook owns.

Third, it's important to take faster action against harmful posts. As you all know, information travels quite quickly on social media platforms; sometimes it's not accurate. And Facebook needs to move more quickly to remove harmful, violative posts — posts that will be within their policies for removal often remain up for days. That's too long. The information spreads too quickly.

Finally, we have proposed they promote quality information sources in their feed algorithm. Facebook has repeatedly shown that they have the levers to promote quality information. We've seen them effectively do this in their algorithm over low-quality information and they've chosen not to use it in this case. And that's certainly an area that would have an impact.

So, these are certainly the proposals. We engage with them regularly and they certainly understand what our asks are.

Q And then, one of the problems with vaccines right now is that they become politicized. You guys — the White House has obviously made the calculation that it's important to be more aggressive in confronting this information, but is there at all a concern that that could backfire and further contribute to politicization? And is there anything that you can do to prevent that at this point?

MS. PSAKI: Well, you're abs- — you're absolutely right, I should say, Alex, in

that we have to be very careful and we are mindful of being quite careful of not politicizing the effectiveness of vaccines, the fact that they can save lives — young people, old people, middle-of-the-road people.

It's important for us — we've made a calculation to push back on misinformation. You're right. But that's one of the reasons, as Dr. Murthy was conveying, we have empowered, engaged, funded local voices, because they are often the most trusted voices — doctors, medical experts, clergy — you know, people who are members of — civic leaders in communities.

That's where we are putting most of our resources, even as we are working to combat misinformation that's traveling online or traveling, unfortunately, out of the mouth of elected officials from time to time.

Go ahead.

Q Just want to follow up on the ransomware —

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q — questions. So the President told us last week that there's this meeting tomorrow of the U.S.-Russian working group on ransomware. Can you say a little bit more about that meeting?

MS. PSAKI: I think it was actually yesterday.

Q It was? Okay. And can you give us any kind of a further readout of what decisions were made, if any? Last week, the President also said that it made sense to potentially go after servers that were being used in these ransomware attacks. Has the administration made any decisions about whether to proceed with that kind of action?

MS. PSAKI: So I would say that the meeting, which I believe was yesterday — I will double confirm for you, Andrea, and for others — but, is part of ongoing engagement that has been occurring at the expert level since the President met with President Putin.

So it's been ongoing. No one meeting is necessarily decisive; it's about having

a continued discussion about our expectations and steps that need to be taken to address ransomware attacks, cyberattacks, and what the capacities are on information of course that we have.

In terms of specific actions, the President, of course, reserves the right and the option to respond in a time and a manner of his choosing should he believe actions warrant. But I'm not going to preview that from the podium today or probably any day.

Go ahead.

Q So a senior administration official had told us in the aftermath of that conversation that we should expect action within days and weeks, and some of it would be visible, some of it would not be visible. I understand you can't share a lot of information, but can you say whether any action has in fact been taken that perhaps is not visible to us?

MS. PSAKI: There's nothing more I can preview or detail for you from here. I certainly understand the interest.

Go ahead.

Q The President has designated \$10 billion for testing in schools, but we've seen some states, like Idaho and Iowa — they say they don't even want the money. So is that a mistake? And who should be held responsible if children in those schools get sick?

MS. PSAKI: Well, certainly, we've always said from the beginning that local school districts are going to make decisions about how to use the funding and resources available, but also how they're going to apply the mitigation measures that have been laid out by the CDC. And certainly we would expect that members of their local community, parents, others who care about the health and wellbeing of their children would voice their concern if they have it. But it's always worked that way in terms of local school districts implementing policies.

The role of the CDC is to provide public health information. Our role from the federal government was to secure funding to ensure schools that need

resources — they don't all need resources — but have access to those funds should they need it. Many have used it, many have applied it, and many schools will be opening as a result of that funding.

Q Is there a concern, though, about not being able to even track an outbreak if there is one because of the lack of testing, possibly?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we certainly — the CDC certainly does track where there is a rise in cases. As you see, they put out publicly available data. I expect they would continue to do that. But I would point you to them for more information on how they would track.

Q Can I just ask one quick follow-up on inflation: We heard from the Fed Chair, Jerome Powell; he's testifying on Capitol Hill this week. He noted that inflation has notably increased but he believes that it will remain elevated in the coming months before moderating.

We've heard from Republicans who say the administration is sort of flooding the economy with cash. Even Democrats like Senator Joe Manchin — I talked to him yesterday — he says that he has concerns about inflation. Is the White House underestimating the impact of all of this government spending that it will have on inflation?

MS. PSAKI: Well, our experts believe — and the data shows and the Federal Reserve Chair, who operates independently, conveyed, yesterday — that most of the price increases we are seeing are expected to be temporary due to the consequences of restarting an economy shut down during the pandemic. And we're seeing that in certain industries more than others as prices go back to where they were pre-pandemic. And that certainly was an ex- — we had an expectation that would be an impact.

So areas like spike in car prices due to supply chain challenges on the — on the restart or a spike in hotel room costs as the hospitality industry gets going — these are — a number of these are transitory or they're impacted by other factors, including supply chain issues, which we're working with Democrats and Republicans to help address through the CHIPS legislation.

But I want to be clear: We take — we understand the threat that inflation

poses. We will be vigilant as responses are needed — are needed.

As it relates to legislation: We're continuing to advocate for the way to keep prices in our economy down is to increase the supply of goods that consumers want to buy and keep the costs of producing and getting them to market lower. That's exactly what the President's Bipartisan Infrastructure Framework and the Build Back Better plans will do.

And I would also remind you all, it's an eight-year investment in better roads, bridges, and transit systems. So this is not an immediate influx in the next few months of funding; it's over the course of several years because this is a long-term issue.

And it will also — if, as we — as we work to pass the Build Back Better reconciliation package, increase the availability of childcare, more workers will enter the workforce, increasing our output, and helping to keep prices down.

So we are quite mindful of it. We do monitor it. I would also note the Federal Reserve, who's independent, has also projected that the inflation numbers will come down to about 2.2 next year from where they're projecting for this year, which is something we also watch closely.

Q Can I follow up on that, Jen?

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead, Kaitlan.

Q Is the —

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead, Kaitlan.

Q Are you confident that the government is going to be able to find the parents who qualify for the Child Tax Credit but are outside of the tax system?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we have a — as you've seen as we've implemented a number of our programs to date, we have a means — a number of means of trying to identify individuals who are eligible for these programs. Some of it is by

promotion in communities for individuals who may not have had to pay taxes or may not be in the system.

And certainly we will be vigilant and do everything we can to reach every single person who's eligible, get out the word to communities that they are — that they are maybe people who are eligible, even if they don't make enough money to pay taxes.

Q So what are the other avenues, specifically, that you're using to find these parents?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think you've seen us use a number of avenues in the past few months where there were not individuals — as it related to our \$1,400 checks that we put out just a few months ago. We put out a website where people could go if they had not paid taxes because they did not make enough money to pay taxes.

We also, of course, work with local communities to get out and make sure — get the word out and make sure people know they are eligible. Again, I would think — I think that, starting today, the vast majority — vast, vast majority of people who are eligible, of course, will get their checks direct — through direct deposit and through direct checks. So, we're talking about a small percentage of individuals who we would be looking to find. And, of course, we will be vigilant about doing everything we can to find them.

Q And one follow-up on that: Will the President accept a spending bill that does not extend the tax credit for four years like he wants?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there's —

Q (Inaudible.)

MS. PSAKI: There are a range of details I know you are all eager to see and to have, and there's been reporting about it. We will certainly leave it to Leader Schumer and Democrats on the Hill to put out all of the specific details.

But the President certainly understands that there could be changes, even to his original proposal and even from here as the final negotiations continue.

Q So, he would accept that? Sorry.

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to negotiate from here, Kaitlan, but we'll look to see what the final package looks like.

The President has advocated for an extension of the Child Tax Credit because he thinks it is a benefit that helps working families. That's why he's proposed it in multiple packages, and we'll look to see the final details.

Go ahead, Weijia.

Q Thank you, Jen. I know you said this is moving, but some Democrats have expressed they believe the Child Tax Credit should be permanent. Does President Biden agree with that or does he think the four-year extension is adequate?

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you know, Weijia, he put in his proposal a five-year extension. He certainly understands that there was going to be — and there was — a range of views. Some wanted it shorter. Some wanted it longer. Some didn't want it at all. That's part of the negotiations and the discussion.

I think one of the calculations here that senators and Congress have to work through is what components can be worked through that you can pay for in the package. That's a factor as it relates to — certainly to the Child Tax Credit, which, as I understand, costs about a billion dollars a year.

So, we'll let them work out the length of it, and we look forward to seeing the de- — the final details made public in the coming days.

Q On the bipartisan bills —

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q Some Republicans have just said that — that they're not prepared to vote on something that is not written yet. They just expressed this on the Hill. As Senator Romney said, it would be a dereliction of duty to vote, even procedurally, on something that has not been written. Does the President

agree with Senator Schumer's timeline to hold a vote before all the language is finalized?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first, I think it's important to remember that there was an agreement that many senators were a part of — Democrat and Republican — on the framework that is the basis of this piece of legislation — right? — that they agreed to. The President certainly expects that everyone will stay true to their commitment, as — as he will.

Of course, the President believes that his most important role he can play is to continue to advocate for the key components of what's in this package, why it's important for people to support it in Congress, and why the American people should be excited about investments in roads and railways and bridges and investments in making sure we're addressing our climate crisis.

He will leave the mechanics and the timeline up to Leader Schumer.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. Now that you've had a few days to think about it, does this White House still think the protests in Cuba are happening because people are upset about a rise in COVID cases there or is there some thought, maybe, given to the possibility that they're protesting because they are sick of communism?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Peter, first, I would say: Communism is a failed ideology, and we certainly believe that. It has failed the people of Cuba. They deserve freedom. They deserve a government that supports them, whether that is making sure they have health and medical supplies, access to vaccines, or whether they have economic opportunity and prosperity.

And instead, this has been a government — an authoritarian communist regime — that has repressed its people and has failed the people of Cuba. Hence, we're seeing them in the streets.

But I would note that the ideology of the government, which has failed, has led to a fail- — a lack of access to economic opportunity, to medical supplies,

to COVID vaccines. So all of those pieces are true.

Q And there are protesters now in this country who are chanting, as these protests in Cuba are going on, “Where is Biden?” So, where is he? What is he doing to protect these people who are rising up against the leaders of this failed experiment?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first, he is certainly advocating for and speaking out, as we put out a statement — multiple statements — maybe one of you will ask him a question about Cuba today. I will — I will leave it to all of you to determine that.

But, one, he has made clear that he stands with the Cuban people and their call for freedom from both the pandemic and from decades of repression and economic suffering to which they’ve been subjected by Cuba’s authoritarian regime.

There’s an ongoing review of our own policies. And as we look at those policies, one of the big factors is ensuring we are not doing anything to pad the pockets of a corrupt authoritarian regime. And that is certainly a factor as he’s considering, but we’re looking closely at how we can help in a humanitarian way, how we can help support the voices of the Cuban people, and there’s an ongoing policy review in that regard.

Q We’d be happy to ask him about it later if he calls on us. (Laughter.) But one more —

MS. PSAKI: Anyone can ask anything they want. But go ahead.

Q One more for you: Why is the Secretary of State Blinken trying to address human rights in the U.S. by inviting experts — U.N. experts from Cuba and China here?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first, I would say that the Secretary put out an extensive statement on why he is holding — why he believes that we need to play a role in lifting up and pushing countries to do better on human rights, on ending systemic racism in their countries. Certainly, human rights is always going to be a priority for the Biden administration and for this State Department.

As the Secretary said in his statement, he believes responsible nations must not shrink from scrutiny of their human rights record. Rather, they should acknowledge it with the intent to improve it, and also push and lift up and put a — shine a light on other countries that need to do better. And that is the role we're playing here from the United States.

Q But you just rattled off all these problems with Cuba. They've got dissenters disappearing down there. In China, they've got a million religious minorities in internment camps. Why are they going to come here and tell us how to improve our country?

MS. PSAKI: I certainly don't think that's the format of the event. But lifting up and elevating human rights; systemic racism; the — the steps that have been taken — the poor treatment of Uyghurs, as I think you're referencing here — in China; and pushing other countries with a spotlight on them to do better is certainly a role we can play from the United States.

Go ahead.

Q Can I ask about South Africa very quickly?

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q There have been days of looting and unrest there in South Africa. They've now destroyed hundreds of businesses. At least 117 people there have been killed. Does the White House have any reaction to what's taking place there? And what, if any, role does the U.S. government have here to help try to quell the situation?

MS. PSAKI: We certainly track and watch closely and certainly have concerns about unrest that we see in the streets in South Africa.

In terms of the specific actions, I think the State Department is probably best equipped, but I'm happy to talk to our national security team if there's anything specifically we can convey from here.

Q Let me follow up. Yesterday, I asked you about Afghanistan. Is there

anything more you can tell us about those Special Immigrant Visas as they relate to the Afghan interpreters, translators, engineers, and others?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. Let me try to provide a little bit more detail on how the process works, which I — you have all understandably been asking about.

So, as I've noted in the past, our immediate focus is on interested and eligible Afghan nationals and their families who have supported the United States and our partners in Afghanistan and are in the application pipeline — so translators, interpreters, others, their family members who are in the process.

There are approximately 20,000 Afghans who have applied. So, those are the individual interpreters or translators; that does not include their family members. And about half that have completed the necessary paperwork to move forward in the process.

I believe, also, the State Department is going to do a more thorough briefing, but I'll just go through as many details as I can from here.

Once individuals — this is how the process works — once individuals are approved through the security vetting process — which their paperwork conclusion does not conclude it; there's another vetting process they would conclude — they may be eligible under humanitarian parole.

Under that parole, a lot — a large portion of that group could be relocated directly to a military base in the United States where they would receive medical checkups.

Those who have not yet completed their background checks would first be relocated from Afghanistan to either a U.S. military base overseas or to third countries, where they will be safely housed until their visa processing is complete and they can be transferred to the United States.

I would also note we are not considering any location or place for the third-party countries that would not be safe, would not treat them with respect, and not — would not ensure that they are treated humanely through the journey of their process.

Also, on our vetting process — this is a thorough process. There are some of these individuals who have completed their paperwork and are in through the vetting process. Their family members may not be in the same stage of the vetting process, so that may have an impact too of the timeline and how — not the timeline, but of, kind of, how they're moved and where they are moved to.

So — and the third par- — the third-country move would be temporary until they finalize their paperwork and security vetting process is complete.

So that is a little bit more detail on the process. Hopefully, that helps.

Go ahead, Alex.

Q President — former-President Bush yesterday, in an interview, criticized the withdrawal, and he said he's very concerned about the Afghan women. So what is the U.S. going to do to ensure the safety of those women in Afghanistan after we leave?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first, I would say that the President agrees that we need to ensure we are continuing to support — through humanitarian programs, through security programs — the women of Afghanistan. And we certainly respect the right of the former President to voice his view on — on Afghanistan and the President's decision.

It's not a secret that President Biden and President Bush haven't seen eye to eye on matters relating to the use of military force. So, we respect his right to voice his opinion; we just disagree.

I would also note that while we continue to provide security and humanitarian assistance, we also intend to have a diplomatic presence on the ground to continue to be a source and resource for individuals in Afghanistan.

Q And, just secondly, Senator Manchin is quite upset about some of the climate provisions in the 3.5 trillion package. Is the White House reaching out to him? Is it — is the White House prepared to move off of some of that —

lessen the — some of the provisions?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we, of course, are in touch with Senator Manchin, I can assure you, as we are in touch with a number of senators who will be — who have been pivotal partners and will continue to be moving forward.

I think there was — one of the concerns I think I saw expressed — but tell me if this is what you were asking about — is fossil fuels. Is that the specific piece?

Q Right.

MS. PSAKI: So, while of course the pa- — the plan and the package will go a long way in addressing the climate crisis — and that is a huge priority to the President, ensuring that these tax credits are in the reconciliation bill, which is something that did not make it into the bipartisan deal, is something the President has advocated for. And we're eager, of course, to pivot to a clean energy future.

We don't intend to do so just by — just by banning fossil fuels or leaving any working community behind. And what we'd certainly convey to any concerned individuals is that President Biden has formed an interagency working group to mobilize federal investments to support hard-hit coal, oil, and gas, and power plant communities across the country. That working group has already identified 30 billion in existing federal resources that could be accessed by communities.

We don't want to lose — leave communities behind. We still think we can move forward in addressing our climate crisis.

Go ahead, Steve.

Q A follow-up to that —

MS. PSAKI: First day of your presidency. Congratulations, I think?

Q Thank you very much. No, it's —

MS. PSAKI: I don't know if it's "congratulations"; it seems hard to make. Go ahead.

Q — "Thank you" when it's over. (Laughter.)

I wanted to ask a follow-up to Alex's question, and that is: How does the President see his role in the negotiation on the reconciliation bill? Is he an intermediary between some of the more liberal elements of his party and Senator Manchin? Is he a closer? Is he directly involved in this? He went up to Capitol Hill yesterday. What's he going to be doing in the weeks ahead?

MS. PSAKI: He's going to be available for whatever is needed to get these bills across the finish line. And a lot of the discussions are happening, certainly, at a staff level. As you all know, we have a number of very experienced individuals here who have gotten a lot of bills across the finish line: Steve Ricchetti, Ron Klain, Louisa Terrell, and many beyond them. They are playing a big role — Brian Deese — in discussing and having conversations with members.

A lot of the discussions, though, are primarily between the Democratic members themselves about what the final package and the final details look like. Leader Schumer and his team will put out the final details on — on the timeline that works for them.

But I will tell you: The President is available. He's ready. He'll pick up the phone. He'll host people. He'll have snacks, drinks — whatever is needed in order to get these bills across the finish line. And I think leaders in Congress certainly know that.

Oh, go ahead, Brian.

Q Thanks. Thank you very much. Two questions. One, to follow up on inflation. Inflation surged to 5.4 percent in June — its the largest jump since 2008. You all say it's temporary, but today Axios is reporting the JPMorgan Chase CEO is saying, "I don't think it's only temporary," and that it's a little worse than the Fed predicts. Now, there's a disparity there. How are you going to address what they think may be permanent?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say, first, that many outside experts, including the Federal Reserve — even if JPMorgan or Jamie Dimon or whomever it is disagrees — have projected that the — that the rise of inflation is transitory and have projected a lowering of inflation next year.

We also have seen in the data that some of the issues — and I outlined this a little bit earlier, like the spike in car prices, which we know has a bigger issue — has another issue involved in it, which is the supply chain issues which we're trying to separately address — or hotels and some of the — of the industries that — related to travel that have seen increases because the economy is turning back on.

So we certainly will refer to economic experts out there, the Federal Reserve, and many others who have projected the transitory nature of this, as well as what we see as a number of the factors that are leading to the impact currently.

Q The second question is about Jeff Flake. Earlier this week, he was nominated to the President to go to Turkey as our envoy. That ambassadorship is — that's a problematic area. What is it exactly in the former senator's background that gives this administration confidence that he can carry out his task there?

MS. PSAKI: Well, he's a former member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — someone who played an important role in discussing, debating, and — and working on a range of foreign policy issues as — in his role as a former U.S. senator. So that is a pretty good basis.

Okay. Francesca, go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. I have a foreign policy question.

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q Just to stay on inflation for a moment: What is the White House's message to average Americans, including those who are limited income, though, who are experiencing higher prices right now for food and clothing and other goods and services. You mentioned that it's expected to die down next year,

but what is your message to them in the meantime? Is it simply just to wait it out?

MS. PSAKI: That's certainly not what I've ever said, but I will say our message is that we understand the threat that inflation poses. We will be vigilant about any responses needed.

It's important for Americans to know and understand that these impacts are temporary and some of these price increases are a result of the economy turning back on. And experts will tell you that — whether it's the hotel industry or the airline industry going back to pre-pandemic prices.

I'll also note that the President has taken a number of steps, including ensuring that the vast majority of the American people were getting \$1,400 checks, getting the Child Tax Credit out to people's bank accounts today, because he knows that Americans need a little extra help — still need a little extra help as the economy turns back on. So he's committed to helping working people, and it's also important for people understand the transitory nature of inflation.

Q And can you provide a status update on investigative assistance for Haiti? And also, when can the public expect the administration to make a determination on whether it's changing its policy towards Cuba?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. I don't have anything for you on the timeline on Cuba policy. I will note that we certainly look at the policy through the prism of how we can most help the Cuban people — the people who have been out in the streets looking to have their voices heard in these protests.

And even as we look at individual components of policies that would be under consideration — including, say, remittances — there are a range of factors. There are a number, of course, of people who have called for a return for allowing remit- — remittances to go from family members to individuals in Cuba.

On the flip side of that, or one of the challenges is: the prevention or our desire to prevent remittances or any funding going in the hands or the pockets of leaders in Cuba.

So, these are challenging issues. There's an ongoing review. I don't have a timeline to preview for you.

In terms of Haiti — let me see. I do think I have a little bit of an update for you. Let me see what I have for you.

So we've — we've provided a couple of updates of what we've provided. So, I — just in case you don't have this. The FBI is providing investigative assistance to the Haitian authorities at the request of the government of Haiti. They remain committed to working alongside our international partners to administer justice. That was a specific ask.

We're also continuing to provide ongoing security assistance and — and consultations, as they have also requested. We're still working with leaders in Haiti to refine their requests, and that review is ongoing. We're in regular touch. And as we have additional components to provide, we'll share that with all of you.

Q I think we have to wrap.

MS. PSAKI: Okay. Let's — go ahead. One more. One more.

Q Thanks, Jen. I — two quick ones. So, first —

MS. PSAKI: Uh — yeah, I know. I — we're wrapping. It's like a last one.

Q — Senate and House — Senate and House Democrats say that they want to put citizenship halfway into the reconciliation package. Is the White House supportive of that strategy?

MS. PSAKI: Yep.

Q Okay. And then — can I squeeze in my last one — (laughter) — since that was so fast?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. That was an easy one. Go ahead.

Q Okay, so the — Florida's governor and some FEC commissioner in Miami, representatives are calling on Biden to greenlight a plan that would allow the deployment of higher altitude communication balloons to beam Internet into Cuba. Is this something the administration plans to do? And if not, why not?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the lack of Internet access, as you know, which is why you're asking, is a huge issue in Cuba and one that is very challenging for the people of Cuba so they can gain access to accurate information, they can correspond with family members and others.

We are certainly looking at that to see what can be done to address, but in terms of that specific proposal, I don't have an assessment of that. I can see if there's more specifics on it.

Q Thank you.

MS. PSAKI: Okay. Thanks, everyone. Thanks, everyone.

1:53 P.M. EDT