

Politics

HEALTH

Pair of vaccine regulators to leave the FDA

Biden administration defends campaign for booster shots

By Tom Howell Jr.
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The White House defended its COVID-19 vaccine booster shot campaign Tuesday after outside advisers complained of limited data on the need for third doses and senior Food and Drug Administration officials abruptly retired amid criticism of President Biden's decision to trumpet the plan before regulators had signed off on it.

The booster decision "was made by and announced by the nation's leading public health officials," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said, rattling off a list that included leaders at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health and acting Food and Drug Commissioner Janet Woodcock.

Mr. Biden wants to begin giving third doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine to people who received their second dose eight months prior. He said the FDA and the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) must sign off on the plan but he announced a start date of Sept. 20, anyway, leading to charges he preempted experts.

ACIP members on Monday said data on the need for boosters is limited, signaling they might



ASSOCIATED PRESS

White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said the decision to have booster shots "was made by" the "nation's leading public health officials."

provide a reason for their departures in a letter to agency employees.

But a former senior FDA official told Endpoints News they were upset that CDC advisers were involved in decisions that are normally the FDA's purview. The clincher, the official said, was the White House getting ahead of the FDA on booster shots.

Mr. Zients said the administration wanted to be upfront with people about signs of waning immunity in vaccinated people and fears it could lead to hospitalizations down the road, even if the shots are largely staving off severe illness for the vaccinated now.

"We announced our approach in order to stay ahead of the virus, give states and pharmacies time to plan, and to be transparent with the American people — as to the latest data and expert clinical judgments from the team — to give them time to do their own planning," Mr. Zients said. "This is pending FDA conducting an independent evaluation and CDC's panel of outside experts issuing a booster dose recommendation."

Dr. Marks said the departure of Dr. Gruber, the OVRD director since 2011, is a "huge loss" and that Dr. Krause's "keen insight and experience" will be sorely missed.

"We are confident in the expertise and ability of our staff to continue our critical public health work, including evaluating COVID-19 vaccines," said FDA spokeswoman Stephanie Caccamo.

Still, the high-level departures come at a critical juncture in the COVID-19 fight, as the delta variant rips through poorly vaccinated areas and sparks fears of "breakthrough infections" in the fully vaccinated.

Mr. Biden, seven months into his presidency, hasn't nominated a permanent FDA commissioner. The agency is now deciding whether to approve COVID-19 vaccines for children aged 5 to 11.

Critics say the booster plan, meanwhile, could distract from the main goal of getting all eligible people vaccinated — only 52% of the U.S. population had completed their vaccine course as of Tuesday.

The World Health Organization also panned richer countries for rolling out booster shot programs instead of sharing their doses with poor nations that need to start vaccinations. CDC Director Rochelle Walensky defended the plan amid skepticism from her agency's own panel of outside advisers.

She said the ACIP reviewed data that "looked at increased waning with regard to the vaccine effectiveness for infection and some suggestion there was increased waning vaccine effectiveness against hospitalization," she said. "The ACIP did not review international data that actually has led us to be even more concerned about increased risk of vaccine effectiveness warning against hospitalization, severe disease and death. They will be reviewing that as well."

She said the complete package of data showed it was critical to "plan ahead to remain ahead of the virus."

ECONOMY

Pandemic eats into Social Security's solvency

By Stephen Dinan
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Social Security's revenue will begin to decline this year, crossing a critical fiscal threshold as the program begins a slide toward depletion of its trust funds in little more than a decade, the program's trustees said in a stark report Tuesday.

And both of Social Security's benefit programs, Old-Age Survivors Insurance for older adults, and Disability Insurance for those unable to work, failed the trustees' tests of short-range financial adequacy.

The revenue decline had been predicted in previous reports, but its arrival is still a stark warning sign in the federal government's fiscal health checkup.

The trustees said that while the trajectory has been grim for some time, the coronavirus pandemic and the economic downturn it spawned took a significant toll on Social Security, slicing a year off the deadline for when the trust funds will be depleted and the program will no longer be able to pay out full promised benefits.

The new deadline is 2034, and payments will be reduced to 78% of what was promised, the trustees said.

"The pandemic and precipitous recession have clearly had significant effects on the actuarial

status of the OASI and DI Trust Funds, and the future course of the pandemic is still uncertain," the trustees said.

Medicare was also slammed by the pandemic, said the trustees, as income plummeted and expenses surged, with payments for testing and treatment of an older population particularly ravaged by the disease.

But Medicare beneficiaries also put off procedures amid the pandemic, "more than offsetting" the new costs, the trustees said in a separate report on Medicare, the federal health program for those 65 and older.

The 2021 reports are the first to take full stock of the pandemic.

Social Security is funded by a payroll tax applied to wages earned. It is not a welfare program but is instead supposed to be a type of pension, in which Americans across the income spectrum pay into it and get benefits commensurate with those payments.

The program's finances have been declining for years, with annual payroll tax income insufficient to cover the program's benefit payments since 2010.

This year will be the first that the combined income from payroll taxes and interest won't cover promised benefits, the trustees said. That imbalance

will continue for the rest of the century, with the two combined trust funds depleted in 2034.

Under the law, Social Security then will have to cut its payments to meet income, and will pay out 78 cents on each dollar the program has promised to pay. By 2095, the end of the 75-year actuarial period the trustees studied, the program will pay out 74 cents of each dollar promised.

"If we wanted to fix the system and we wanted to act immediately, we would have to cut benefits 21% next year," said Chuck Blahous, who used to serve as one of the public trustees for Social Security.

Underlying the imbalance is the ratio of workers supporting retirees.

From 1974 to 2008, the ratio was 3.2 to 3.4 workers per beneficiary. That began to decline with the Great Recession, and is now down to 2.7 workers per beneficiary. By 2035, when baby boomers will mostly have retired, it will be 2.3 workers per beneficiary.

Efforts to overhaul Social Security have gone nowhere on Capitol Hill over the years, with Democrats' demands for bigger benefit checks sunk by the fiscal realities of paying for them.

Mr. Blahous said the numbers are so bad that both sides of the ideological spectrum must give — conservatives will have to embrace tax increases, and liberals will have to stomach benefit cuts.

Advertisement

Advertisement

U.S. Strategy for Ukraine Must Include Minority Rights

says leader of the Hungarian minority, László Brenzovics

On September 1st, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will meet President Biden at the White House to discuss ways to expand strategic cooperation between Ukraine and the U.S. This cooperation, however, must be based on shared universal values – including respect for the fundamental rights of ethnic minorities.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union 30 years ago, Ukraine has been an independent, multiethnic country. The largest minority are the Russians, but there are significant communities of ethnic Bulgarians, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, and others such as the Crimean Tatars.

For the first 25 years of its recent independence, Ukraine ensured the fundamental rights of ethnic minorities: the right to be educated in their native language and, within reasonable limits, to use minority languages in public affairs.

However, things changed in 2014, with Russia's annexation of Crimea. To counteract Russian influence in eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian government radically changed its minority policy. While these measures primarily target the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine, the radical restrictions on native language use have devastated other ethnic groups, too.

- Since 2017, new laws on education and the state language severely restrict ethnic minorities in using and studying in their native language.
- As of July 1, 2021, a new law limits the definition of 'indigenous' minorities. The law not only contravenes common sense, but is also highly discriminatory. While certain indigenous peoples including the Bulgarians, Hungarians, Romanians, and Poles—and of course, the Russians – are not recognized, nor are their language rights.
- The current draft Law on National Communities, too, is built upon vague concepts that limit rather than protect existing rights. Instead of 'minorities,' it talks about "communities" – an apparent bid to evade Ukraine's existing commitments to internationally recognized minority rights instruments.

The Venice Commission, an advisory body of the Council of Europe in which the U.S. is represented, established that Ukraine has failed to ensure the linguistic rights of minorities, and recommended that Ukraine implement measures to ensure a sufficient level of teaching in minority languages. The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy called on Ukraine to ensure the rights and non-discrimination of national minorities. So far, Ukraine has completely ignored the Council of Europe recommendations.

Hate speech and hate crimes against ethnic minority groups continue to be tolerated. Over the past three years, ultra-nationalist groups set fire to the office of the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Subcarpathia; posted 'stop the separatists' billboards with photos of Hungarian community leaders, including me; and run a website that lists the addresses of ethnic Hungarian community leaders, branding them 'enemies of Ukraine' – all with impunity.

Ukrainian authorities themselves also intimidate the Hungarian minority. Last year, based on false charges, armed security commandos raided several Hungarian minority institutions in Subcarpathia. President Zelensky has intentionally encouraged anti-Hungarian sentiment, publicly comparing the Hungarian ethnic community to the situation in the Donetsk Basin – knowing full well that the comparison is absurd.

National minorities in Ukraine are not new arrivals; this region has been our home for more than a thousand years. As Hungarians in Subcarpathia, we do not want special or privileged treatment. We do not want to be labeled as enemies of the state; we have always been loyal to Ukraine. We only want to be recognized as the indigenous national minority we are; to preserve our language and cultural identity; and to work together with the majority population as equals to ensure a successful future for Ukraine.

President Biden has said that the United States should be able to 'walk and chew gum at the same time' – that is, to implement a foreign policy based on both national interest and principles of human rights. In engaging with Ukraine, this means that the U.S. must also insist upon respect for the rights and equal treatment of ethnic minorities.

László Brenzovics is president of the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Subcarpathia, which represents the 150,000-strong ethnic Hungarian minority in Ukraine. Born in 1964, in the village of Zăpszony, Ukraine, he holds a doctorate in history and has been active in local and national community affairs since 1990.

Paid for by Hungarian Human Rights Foundation.