

COVID-19: Masking up, getting vaccinated and protecting each other



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Most days, you have or should have received a message on safety from your supervisors/managers. After their message, you generally learn how sincere they were. After they tell you or teach you what you should be doing to do your job safely, you later discover that they did not intend for the new safety plan to cost any more time.

If it takes more time to do it safely, they should not weigh the cost against the benefit... but that is often how business makes its decisions, both inside and outside of our postal world.

In earlier columns on the subject of COVID-19, I expressed optimism that the changes implemented by the current administration put more faith in the scientific community to address the pandemic, as opposed to relying on the business community to make the necessary decisions.

Last month, President Biden released his COVID-19 Action Plan. If you have not seen it, go to [whitehouse.gov/covidplan](https://www.whitehouse.gov/covidplan), where you can read the whole plan. The narrative references the sharp decline in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths that came about after the vaccination frenzy began, then addresses the turn-about caused by the more challenging Delta variant.

The plan puts the pandemic in perspective by labeling what we face as:

...a pandemic of the unvaccinated, which is wreaking havoc in many communities: spreading the virus, risking our economy, filling our hospitals and putting our kids at greater risk...

The president's plan identified the following six main components:

1. Vaccinating the unvaccinated.
2. Furthering protection for the vaccinated.
3. Keeping schools safely open.
4. Increasing testing and requiring masking.
5. Protecting our economic recovery.
6. Improving care for those with COVID-19.

The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (coronavirus.jhu.edu) lists 41,028,341 confirmed cases in the United States and a death toll of 660,899 as I write this.

Further, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that real-world data shows that vaccination is a critical tool to reduce COVID-19 rates among adults 65 and older. The statistics show that the two-shot vaccines have protected this population by reducing their risk of hospitalization by 94 percent. This is very important. The higher the vaccination rate, the greater benefit there is to our total population, which translates to relieving the burden on our health care system and saving lives.

I have been advised that one particular hospital in southern California had filled its intensive care unit (ICU) beds earlier this year, and that after vaccines had been approved and rolled out, the ICU beds in this same hospital were freed up as its COVID-19 population was reduced to a single patient.

All looked good until the Delta variant again filled that hospital to its capacity. The facility and its health care workers are again strained beyond their capacity. Components Nos. 1 and 2 of President Biden's plan are essential to the recovery that is needed to sustain life as we knew it (or at least as close as possible to what we remember).

Component No. 3 bears a title that we should repeat as often as necessary: keeping schools safely open.

In one state, there is a battle between the governor and science. As this state experienced an increase in COVID-19 cases brought on by the Delta variant, this governor pushed for and then signed into law a bill that prohibited businesses, schools and government entities from requiring proof of vaccination, and then topped it off with banning any mask mandate in public schools. The anti-masking ban leaves it to parents to decide whether or not to allow their children to mask up in school. What about the other children at the same school?

As a result of a business-related rejection of science, those children are exposed to a higher risk of infection.

President Biden's plan includes the following observation:

We know how to keep students safe in schools by taking the right steps to prevent transmission—including getting all staff and eligible students vaccinated, implementing universal indoor masking, maintaining physical distancing, improving ventilation, and performing regular screening testing for students and school staff. For those too young to be vaccinated, it is especially critical that they are surrounded by vaccinated people and mask in public indoor spaces, including schools....

Err on the side of caution. Keep a mask on each other.