

2022.11.14 HHS Convening to Advance Patient Safety

Transcript of remarks by HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra

Xavier Becerra: Beth, thank you very much. Great to see so many people in the audience. I just came from some interviews on COVID. We're trying to get folks vaccinated and we're letting them know about this updated vaccine and we're -- we've initiated a campaign to keep people safe. And so, it's only fitting that I go from there to here where we're doing everything we can to try to keep people safe. And I simply say to each and every one of you, especially those of you who actually are in the game of patient care, thank you so much for everything you're trying to do. To those who were actually patients or experienced as a family member an incident, thank you for your words that's going to help us understand better what we can do.

I'm going to do something because I'm going to -- I can't stay for all the sessions, so I'm going to keep my remarks briefer than what my team told me I had. Because I'd like to make sure I can stick around to hear some of the comments. And so, for all the team at HHS, who I was supposed to introduce, you're going to have a chance to speak or say your name. I'm going to -- we got a great team. We -- actually, we're ranked number two in all of the federal government when it comes to a place to work, and the only place that beats us out is NASA. And I -- we can't figure out how to send people to Mars yet. But at HHS, if we can do that, I guarantee we will be number one. We're going to do everything we can to make sure we have the best team working on behalf of America. But this is really not for us at HHS to do the talking, it's really for all of you. We want to hear what we can do best.

I couldn't ask you today that the news is out that an airline -- American Airline carrier crashed today and killed more than 200 people. Now, stop, stop because that didn't happen. But you see the reaction? If I were to tell you that more than 200 people were going to die today from a medical error, you could say, "That can't be," but that's exactly what's happening. We're essentially losing an airline full of Americans pretty much every day from medical errors, but we don't think about it. But is it still the third, fourth leading cause of death in America? We don't think about it. It's there. It's with us. And the worst part about this is that word error, which means so much of this is avoidable. And so, we have work that we can do together to make things a little bit different.

I think at HHS, we're ready to take on this cause with you. That's why this National Action Alliance that we are establishing come next year, we believe gives us the best chance to make sure HHS is using all of its tools to work with you most effectively because we do believe that not only can we give people a sense that when they walk through the doors of that medical service facility, doctor's office, hospital, urgent care center that they're going to walk out in better health. That's the goal and we want to be there to make sure that happens. But to me, the most important thing that comes with addressing this is the peace of mind that Americans can have that when they're about to send their loved one to what could be the scariest moment in their life so far, they can count and have confidence that our American healthcare system is going to be there and have their back.

And so, we owe it to all of you at HHS to do everything we can to help you the glue that makes it all work well. And so, we are thrilled to be here with you. I just want to encourage you to believe that we can make a difference. COVID made work harder for us. We're getting back to where we were pre-COVID, but that's not good enough. And so, what do we need to do? And we can tell you from HHS in our experience -- at least my experience in 16 or 18 months of work that we can make a difference. When I came into this office back in March, April of 2021, we were seeing within COVID how disparities that always exist in this country are beginning to show up when it came to COVID.

When I got -- started getting reports on COVID, we found that about two-thirds of White American adults had received that first shot of the vaccine. At that point, less than 50 percent of Black American adults had received their first vaccine and only around 50 percent of Latino Americans had received that first vaccine. That's not going to cut it. We can't have people who are being left behind, and so we got to work. But rather than wait for folks to come to the vaccine or come to us, we decided we're going to go to you. And that's what we did. We went to communities that often are left behind.

And I'm very proud to tell you that the team at HHS working with many of you and others in the community, who have nothing to do with healthcare but care about their families, we were able to erase those disparities by the beginning of this year so that 90 percent of White adults, 90 percent of Black adults, and 90 percent of Latino American adults, and along with Asian American, Native American as well had received at least that one shot. We got to get everybody still now with the updated vaccine. But we're going to make sure that we go to you rather than wait for you to come to us. Same way when it comes to this issue of safety for patients, we're not going to wait until you come to us because something bad happened, we want to go to you.

And so, please, let's work together because we have a lot of work to do. We can save quite a few lives. But working together, we offer people before anything happens the peace of night mind knowing that they can have the confidence to use their medical system and be happy. So, thank you all very much. I -- do I turn it over to anybody or what's the next step? I think I turn it over. Okay. Beth, you have it back. Thank you very much.