

# CNN Biden town hall transcript

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TRANSCRIPT—

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ANDERSON COOPER, CNN HOST: And welcome. We are live in the Pabst Theater in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This is a CNN Presidential Town Hall, the first with President Joe Biden.

I'm Anderson Cooper. President Biden is just four weeks into his presidency and facing multiple crises. Nearly 500,000 of our fellow citizens, Americans who have died from COVID-19, millions out of work right now and a nation dangerously divided.

Tonight, we're going to be answering questions from the American people. The president will be answering questions from the American people on his first official trip since taking office. Some of the questioners here voted for him, some did not.

The president and I will not be wearing masks on this stage. He of course, has been vaccinated. Over the past several weeks, I have repeatedly tested negative for coronavirus as recently as yesterday and this morning as well. We will however, be keeping our distance from one another.

And the audience is very limited, socially-distanced and all wearing masks when they are seated. With that, I want to welcome the 46th President of the United States, President Joe Biden.

(APPLAUSE)

JOE BIDEN, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Hey, Anderson.

COOPER: How are you, sir?

BIDEN: Good to see you. Hey, folks, how are you?

(APPLAUSE)

BIDEN: Good to be back, man.

COOPER: Yeah, it's nice to see you, sir.

BIDEN: And you know you enjoyed being home with the baby more, I don't want to hear that (ph) —

COOPER: (LAUGHS) I do, yes.

(LAUGHTER)

COOPER: He's nine and a half months, so I'm very happy.

BIDEN: (LAUGHS) I get it, no, no, everybody knows that I like kids better than people.

COOPER: I saw a picture of you with your grandson recently.

BIDEN: That's right.

COOPER: Yeah.

BIDEN: That's right.

COOPER: So we've got a lot of questions in the audience. We have about 50 or so people here. They're all socially-distanced. We have some folks who voted for you, some folks who did not. And we're going to get in as many questions in as possible.

Before we get to that I just want to start with a couple of just big-picture questions about the pandemic and where we are right now.

BIDEN: Sure.

COOPER: New cases of COVID-19, hospitalizations have fallen by half in the last month, so have new cases, that's the good news. There's this potential threat, potential surge from the variants coming down the pike potentially. When is every American who wants it going to be able to get a vaccine?

BIDEN: By the end of July this year. We have, we came into office, there was only 50 million doses that were available. We have now, by the end of July we'll have over 600 million doses, enough to vaccinate every single American.

COOPER: When you say —

(APPLAUSE)

COOPER: When you say by the end of July, do you mean that they will be available or that people will have been able to actually get them? Because Dr. Fauci —

BIDEN: They will be available.

COOPER: They'll be available.

BIDEN: Be available.

COOPER: OK.

BIDEN: Here, look. What we did, we got into office and found out the supply, there was no backlog, I mean there was nothing in the refrigerator figuratively and literally speaking. And there are 10 million doses a day that were available. We've upped that in the first three weeks that we're in office to significantly more than that.

We've moved out, went to the Pfizer and Moderna and said, can you produce more vaccine and more rapidly? They not only agreed to go from 200 to 400, then they agreed to go to 600 million doses. And we got them to move up the time because we used the National Defense Act to be able to help the manufacturing piece of it to get more equipment and so on.

COOPER: So if at the end of April, excuse me, end of July they're available to actually get them in the arms of people who want them, that will take what, a

couple more months?

BIDEN: Well, no, a lot will be vaccinated in the meantime.

COOPER: OK.

BIDEN: In other words, not just all of a sudden 600 million doses are going to appear. And what's going to happen is it's going to continue to increase as we move along. And we'll have — we'll have reached 400 million by the end of May and 600 million by the middle of — by the end of July.

And the biggest thing, though, as you remember when you and I, I shouldn't say it that way, as remember, but when you and I talked last, we talked about it's one thing to have the vaccine, which we didn't have when we came into office, but a vaccinator. How do you get the vaccine into someone's arm?

So you need the paraphernalia. You need the needle. You need the mechanisms to be able to get it in. You have to have people who can inject it in people's arms.

COOPER: That's been one of the problems is just getting enough people.

BIDEN: Yes, now we have made significant strides increasing the number of vaccinators. I issued an Executive Order allowing former retired docs and nurses to do it. We have over a thousand military personnel. The CDC has, I mean, excuse me, we have gotten the National Guard engaged.

So we have significant number of vaccinators, people who will actually be there. Plus we've opened up a considerable number of locations where you can get the vaccination.

COOPER: I want to introduce you to Kevin Michael (ph). He's an Independent from Wauwatosa. He's a mechanical engineer for a vehicle company. Kevin, welcome. What's your question?

QUESTION: Hi, welcome to Milwaukee.

BIDEN: How you doing?

QUESTION: Good. My question is regarding education —

BIDEN: Yes.

QUESTION: — and considering the hybrid and virtual school instruction have been in place for nearly a year now, what is the plan and recommendation to get students back into the brick-and-mortar buildings? As a parent of four children, I find it imperative that we get back to school as safely as possible.

BIDEN: My mother would say, “God bless you, son, no purgatory for you,” four kids home, I really mean it. And by the way, the loss of being able to be in school is having significant impact on the children and parents as well. And what we found out is there are certain things that make it rational and easy to go back to the brick-and-mortar building.

One, first of all, making sure everybody is wearing protective gear. It’s available to students as well as to teachers, the janitors, the people who work in the cafeteria, the bus drivers. Secondly, organizing in smaller pods, which means that’s why we need more teachers. Instead of a classroom of 30 kids in it, you have three classes in that same of 10 kids each in those, I’m making the number up, less, doesn’t have to be literally 10.

In addition to that, we also have indicated that it is much better, it’s much easier to send kids K through eight back because they are less likely to communicate the disease to somebody else. But because kids and sophomores, juniors and seniors in high school, they socialize a lot more and they’re older and they transmit more than young kids do, it’s harder to get those schools open without having everything from the ventilation systems and having, for example, school bus drivers, you know.

We’ve got to make sure that you don’t have 60 kids or however many, it would depend on the size of the school bus, sitting two abreast in every single seat. And so there’s a lot of things we can do short of and I think that we should be vaccinating teachers. We should move them up in the hierarchy as well.

(APPLAUSE)

COOPER: Well, let me ask you, your administration had set a goal to open the majority of schools in your first 100 days. You’re now saying that means those schools may only be open for at least one day a week —

BIDEN: No, that’s not true. That’s what was reported.

COOPER: Uh-huh.

BIDEN: That's not true. That was a mistake in the communication. But what I'm talking about is I said opening the majority of schools in K through eighth grade, because they're the easiest to open, the most needed to be open in terms of the impact on children and families having to stay at home —

COOPER: So when do you think that would be K through eight —

(CROSSTALK)

COOPER: — at least five days a week if possible?

BIDEN: I think we'll be close to that at the end of the first 100 days. We've had a significant percentage of them being able to be opened. My guess is they're going to probably be pushing to open all summer, to continue like it's a different semester and try to catch up.

(CROSSTALK)

COOPER: Do you think that would be five days a week or just a couple?

BIDEN: I think many of them five days a week. The goal will be five days a week. Now it's going to be harder to open up the high schools for the reasons I have said. And just like you notice the contagion factor in colleges is much higher than it is in high schools or grade schools.

COOPER: I want you to meet, this is Justin Belot (ph). He's a high school teacher from Milwaukee. He's a Democrat.

Justin, thanks for being with us. What's your question?

BIDEN: What do you teach?

QUESTION: I teach English, high school English.

BIDEN: My wife teaches, God love you.

QUESTION: Wonderful. Thank you, Mr. President. So along the same lines as schools, so it's a great debate on when to transition into in-person learning. While

there are numerous warnings not to be in large groups or to have dinner parties or small parties, why is it OK to put students and teachers in close proximity to each other for an entire day, day after day?

With large class sizes and outdated ventilation systems, how and when do you propose this to occur? And finally, do you believe all staff should be vaccinated before doing so?

BIDEN: Number one, nobody is suggesting, including the CDC in its recent report, that you have large classes, congested classes. It's smaller classes, more ventilation, making sure that everybody has a mask and is socially-distanced, meaning you have less, fewer students in one room. Making sure that everyone from the sanitation workers who work in the lavatories, in the bathrooms and to do all the maintenance, that they are in fact able to be protected as well.

Making sure you are in a situation where you don't have the congregation of a lot of people, as I said, including the school bus, including getting on a school bus. So it's about needing to be able to socially distance, smaller classes, more protection. And I think that teachers and the folks who work in the school, the cafeteria worker and other should be on the list of preferred to get a vaccination.

COOPER: I want to introduce you to Kerri Engenbrecht (ph), an Independent from Oak Creek.

Kerri (ph), welcome, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you.

BIDEN: Kerri, how are you?

QUESTION: Very good, thank you. Our 19-year-old son was diagnosed with Pediatric COPD at the age of 14. We're told he has the lungs of a 60-year-old.

He does all he can to protect himself. Last month, he even removed himself from the campus of UW Madison, as he feels it's safer and he has less exposure here at home. We've tried all we can to get him a vaccine.

I hear of others who are less vulnerable getting it based on far less. Do you have a plan to vaccinate those who are most vulnerable sooner, to give them a priority?

BIDEN: Well, the answer is yes, there are. But here is how it works. The states make the decisions on who is in what order. I can make recommendations and for federal programs, I can do that as President of the United States. But I can't tell the state, you must move such-and-such, a group of people up.

But here is what I'd like to do. If you're willing, I'll stay around after this is over and maybe we can talk a few minutes and see if I can get you some help.

(APPLAUSE)

COOPER: Let me just ask you, though, Johnson & Johnson could be authorized, a new vaccine from them could be authorized in a couple of weeks. That would be a big deal —

BIDEN: Yes, it would.

COOPER: — bringing a lot more vaccines on, millions of more doses to the supply. Once that happens, given the urgency of these variants and the potential threat from them, should states stop giving priority to certain groups and just open vaccine access for everyone?

BIDEN: Well, it depends on how much they have available. I think there still should be priority groups in case there are not enough for everyone, available to everybody. And look, we don't know for certain, let me tell you what my national COVID team has said, that the variants, by variants you mean the Brazilian strain, the South African strain, the British strain —

(CROSSTALK)

COOPER: London.

BIDEN: — London, et cetera. Thus far, thus far, there is no evidence that the existing vaccinations available from Moderna and Pfizer do not either make sure that they apply, they work as well against the strain in the United States. And there is no evidence that they're not helpful. So if you can get a vaccination, get it whenever you can get it, regardless of the other strains that are out there.

There are studies going on to determine it's not only more communicable, but are there vaccines — do the vaccines not provide helpful protection by getting the vaccine? There are some speculation — I've got to be very careful here because

millions of people are watching this, it may be that a certain vaccination for a certain strain may reduce from 95 percent to a lower percentage of certainty that it will keep you from getting —

COOPER: It may not be as effective as —

BIDEN: — it may not be as effective.

COOPER: — against a variant, but it still would be effective.

BIDEN: Still be effective. So the clear notion is if you're eligible, if it's available, get the vaccine. Get the vaccine.

COOPER: I want you to meet, this is Dessie Levy (ph), she's a Democrat from Milwaukee. She's a registered nurse, former academic dean. She's also currently a director of a faith-based nonprofit.

Dessie (ph), welcome.

BIDEN: By the way, you've heard me say this before, Becky (sic), if there's any angels in heaven, they're all nurses, male and female. Doctors let you live, nurses make you want to live. I can tell you as a consumer of health care, my family, you're wonderful. Thank you for what you do.

QUESTION: God bless you. Mr. President, hello. My name is Dr. Dessie Levy (ph). And my question to you is considering COVID 19 and its significant impact on black Americans, especially here in Milwaukee and thus, the exacerbation of our racial disparities in health care, we have seen less than three percent of blacks and less than five percent of Hispanics given the total number of vaccines that have been administered to this point.

Is this a priority for the Biden administration? And how will the disparities be addressed? And that's both locally and nationally.

BIDEN: Well, first of all, it is a priority, number one. Number two, there's two reasons for it being the way it is. Number one, there is some history of blacks being used as guinea pigs in other experiments as I need not tell you, Doctor, over the last 50 to 75 to 100 years in America. So there is a concern about getting the vaccine whether it's available or not. But the biggest part of this is access —

QUESTION: Mm-hmm.

BIDEN: — physical access. That's why last week I opened up, I met with the Black Caucus in the United States Congress and agreed that I would — all of the — all of community health centers now, which take care of the toughest of the toughest neighborhoods in terms of illness, they are going to get a million doses, you know, a week, and how we're going to move forward because they're in the neighborhood.

Secondly, we have opened up — and I'm making sure that there's doses of vaccine for over 6,700 pharmacies because almost everyone lives within — not always walking distance, but within the distance of being able to go to the pharmacy like when you got your flu shot. That is also now being opened.