The Daily Dish

The Plan to Stop COVID-19

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As part of his State of the Union address, President Biden highlighted the administration's commitment to continuing to fight COVID-19, as opposed to learning to live with it. Last week, the administration released the details of its National COVID-19 Preparedness Plan, which contains four main goals: protect against and treat COVID-19, prepare for new variants, prevent economic and educational shutdowns, and continue to vaccinate the world. But spare yourself the 96-page workout; Margaret Barnhorst has provided an excellent summary and analysis in her new AAF insight.

At the outset it is important to recognize that some sort of preparedness plan is essential. There is nothing to rule out that 2022 will not have the same late fall/early winter spike in cases that 2021 and 2020 featured. There is nothing to rule out further mutation that generates another Delta- or Omicron-style variant. And nothing has altered the fact that the most important economic policy is success in the public health mission. Only that success will ultimately remove labor market impediments, unsnarl supply chains, and leave individuals free to pursue commerce of all sorts. So it is good that the administration has a plan.

Unfortunately, the administration is not particularly clear on what, exactly, the plan is. As a result, it is also unable to gauge what it will cost. The administration requested $22.5 billion for domestic and international COVID-19 relief. Yet as Barnhorst points out: "According to one of the president's top advisors, this could be more than $100 billion next year and $15 billion per year after that to sustain preparedness efforts, though it is unclear what exactly is included in this estimate that makes it more than four times the current funding request." In other words, take the administration's stated plan with a grain of salt.

As an aside, the Congress was even more skeptical. As we saw yesterday, first the funding amount got cut to $15 billion and then the plan was dropped entirely from the omnibus spending bill because of a dispute over how to pay for it. Stay tuned for more budget

machinations the near future.

It is worth flagging two parts of the “protect and treat” aspects of the plan. The first is the “test to treat” initiative that will provide patients a one-stop option to receive both a free COVID-19 test and, if positive, a free course of antiviral treatment. The catch is that the supply of antiviral treatment is limited; the plan says 1 million courses of Pfizer’s Paxlovid pill will be available this month and 2.5 million more pills will be available next month. Time will tell if this is as effective on the ground as it is touted in the plan.

The other is the idea of “accelerated research and development of a single vaccine to protect against all SARS-origin viruses….” Uh, please, no. We’ve seen this movie before, notably after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when the fantasy was to pre-emptively develop broad-spectrum countermeasures to biologic weapons. The U.S. life sciences industry is genius at generating real solutions to actual threats. Let’s not waste their time and the taxpayer money on this unicorn.

Count me skeptical as well regarding the “Prevent Economic and Educational Shutdowns” component that features “providing schools and businesses with the necessary tools to open and operate safely, such as a new Clean Air in Buildings Checklist from the Environmental Protection Agency, updated workplace guidelines from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and additional investments in the educational workforce, including teaching and support staff.” A checklist and taxpayer cash; what could go wrong?

There is a lot more to be digested, so take a look at the Barnhorst piece. It *is* important to have a plan, but it is not obvious that this is the best plan.