

Why the U.S. should facilitate the distribution of vaccines to cruise ports in the Caribbean and Central America

By way of successful vaccination campaigns and physiologic immunity, the U.S. continues to decrease the chance of domestic COVID-19 transmission; and, over time, the cruise industry will increase its sailings with more vaccinated passengers from the U.S. Nevertheless, COVID-19 remains uncontrolled in many parts of the world and poses a significant risk to both guests and crew on ships sailing to U.S. ports. This is a salient point as the cruise industry leans forward and considers the next set of solutions to protect passengers and crew members with U.S. itineraries.

While a vessel is in port, passengers become a mobile, land-based cohort interacting with many diverse communities and populations. Ports-of-call usually have a very vibrant and interactive culture that lends itself to social mixing within densely populated areas. Most likely, these communities and populations will not have the same level of immunity, nor testing and vaccination resources as within the U.S. We are all aware COVID-19 variants exist around the world. When COVID-19 is left uncontrolled in these port cities, with high levels of person-to-person interaction, the potential for a more resistant, highly infectious, and potentially dangerous variant (or even a novel strain) to develop and be transmitted to our U.S.-based travelers, increases. It also poses a risk for these same U.S.-based travelers to return to their home states and communities and continue to spread a new variant or novel strain.

The variables explained above create a unique dynamic very specific to cruise industry ports-of-call. A focused initiative to increase resources that protect these communities and populations, as well as greatly reduced risk of COVID transmission to the onboard guests and crew, may be warranted. I am convinced that these port communities are one of the remaining, critical variables in the service industry that should be addressed to protect all Americans.

An exploration of how the U.S. might help vaccinate these non-U.S. port cities reveals that vaccination campaigns are possible, however, with nuances. Government to government programs exist. Currently, the COVAX initiative is the driving force in terms of global partnering for vaccinations. Although an admirable collaboration for equitable distribution of vaccines, it currently has supply challenges and it cannot consider the unique dynamics of certain locations, like non-U.S. port cities, nor should it when the concern is U.S. based. Non-governmental organizations could also be utilized in some of these countries, however, they are not resourced or experienced in the mass testing and vaccination efforts that have been implemented across the U.S. Vaccination campaigns can also be implemented by the host country (with popular ports-of-call communities), however there is limited access to vaccines in some of these locations and there is no guarantee that it will be done effectively or efficiently.

Collaboration between the U.S. and countries with ports that are frequented by U.S. passengers could be facilitated in part by the U.S. to protect its citizens in these areas of higher risk. Consider this analogous to the concept of defense-in-depth, which provides for multiple, redundant layers of protection. U.S. collaboration and facilitation of this additional layer of protection would acknowledge that zero risk is not realistic but, much like defense-in-depth, slowing the threat of transmission (through vaccination initiatives in port cities) until the virus is less of a danger, is the most effective way to protect our citizens.

By providing vaccines to specific countries and facilitating its administration, the U.S. can play a primary role in supporting these partnerships to quickly vaccinate a large population (port-based) such as the Bahamas or other locations in the Caribbean, Mexico, and others frequented by cruise line passengers from the U.S.

As Fact Finding Officer, I have observed successful state and county testing and vaccination programs in the U.S. The successful solutions appear scalable to quickly achieve the target number of vaccinations desired and agile enough to adjust to the changes in vaccine supply and logistics. With increased vaccine access provided in part by the U.S., a viable and effective program to vaccinate non-U.S. ports and communities might be established in a relatively short period of time. This could potentially prevent the transmission of global COVID-19 variants or strains into the U.S. This would be at a fraction of the cost for care and treatment of COVID-19 positive patients if this prevention measure were not considered.