

PRIORITY 6: Enhance and Protect the Scientific Integrity, Effectiveness, and Accountability of the Agencies Charged with Protecting the Health of All Americans.

Promoting and protecting the health of individuals, families, and communities is vital to a healthy, thriving, and resilient society. Public health has been defined as “what we as a society do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy.”²⁴² The United States’ approach to public health is an ecosystem of federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial health agencies with specific and varying responsibilities. Government, primarily through public health agencies at every level working in partnership with other agencies, sectors, and

communities, has a unique responsibility to promote and protect the public’s health.²⁴³

With this charge and responsibility, public health agencies have driven more than a century of progress in improving the nation’s health, from reducing infant mortality and controlling infectious diseases to increasing life expectancy and promoting healthier behaviors.

Despite this important role and impact of public health, the public health agencies are currently facing significant threats.

THE PROBLEM

Chronic underfunding, misinformation and disinformation, workforce shortages, threats to public health structures and authority, and an erosion of trust in the nation’s public health agencies are putting decades of progress at risk and jeopardize the health and safety of the nation.

THE SOLUTION

Congress and the Administration must ensure that the federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial agencies that comprise the public health ecosystem have the necessary resources, infrastructure, trust, and authorities to fulfill their mission of protecting and promoting the public’s health.

Threats to the authority of public health agencies.

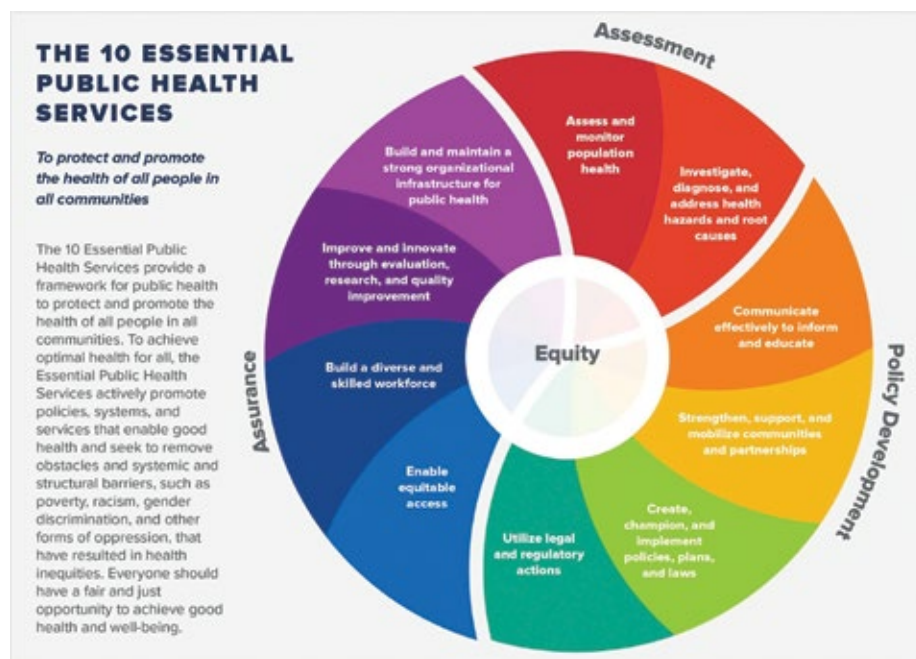
The U.S. Constitution sets a framework for the federal government and states to protect the health of communities and to take actions to stop the spread of infectious diseases into the U.S.^{244,245} Recently, some state legislatures have acted to restrict the authority of public health officials to respond to an emergency – limiting, for example, the ability to issue emergency orders (even when they are reviewable by the courts). Such limitations are dangerous and could have serious implications for the state and local response to outbreaks.²⁴⁶ At this pivotal moment for the health, stability, and prosperity for the nation, it is imperative that governmental public health has the necessary resources, infrastructure, and authorities to carry out its day-to-day functions and to effectively prepare for and respond to emergencies.

At the federal level, judicial decisions may undermine the authority of public agencies. The Supreme Court’s recent decision, *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo*, which overturned the 40-year “Chevron doctrine” precedent of judicial deference to federal agency decisions, could have wide-ranging implications for public health, safety, and the environment.²⁴⁷ As a result of this ruling, it could be easier to challenge long-established rules around drug approval, food safety regulations, and environmental standards.

Threats to resources for public health agencies.

Chronic underfunding of the public health system at all levels has also contributed to longstanding challenges like workforce shortages, outdated data and communications systems, and limited surge capacity during emergencies.²⁴⁸

The 10 Essential Public Health Services describe the activities that public health agencies should undertake in all communities.



Source: de Beaumont Foundation and the Public Health Accreditation Board Center for Innovation.

At the federal level, expiring emergency funds and rescissions have created significant funding cliffs within numerous federal public health programs and among state and local public health agencies. These factors significantly hinder the system's capacity to address the complex and growing health challenges confronting the nation. Because more than 80 percent of CDC's domestic funding is allocated to state, local, territorial, and tribal health departments, academic partners, and community-based organizations,²⁴⁹ cuts to CDC funding weakens public health at all levels.

Threats to the scope of public health agencies.

In addition to these challenges, recent proposals to restructure or limit the scope of work of CDC to solely focus on infectious disease threats are ill-

advised. CDC's core mission is to save lives and protect communities from all health threats – not just infectious diseases. Changes to the CDC scope and mission to one that is less comprehensive would undermine its mission to save lives and protect people from health threats. As eight former CDC directors, who served in both Republican and Democratic Administrations, recently stated, "Limiting our health defense to just some threats would be like allowing our military to protect us from only some types of attack, telling the National Weather Service to warn people about tornadoes but not hurricanes, or allowing doctors to treat only some diseases."²⁵⁰

The agency's success in helping save millions of lives and reducing healthcare costs through injury

prevention, tobacco reduction, and maternal and child health promotion demonstrate the need for such an approach. Repeated public health emergencies and outbreaks – from the Zika outbreak to the East Palestine, Ohio train derailment – have shown that responses require expertise and resources that come from across the agency rather than a single program or center. Furthermore, communicable and noncommunicable diseases and emergencies are inextricably linked: people with underlying health conditions are at higher risk of death from COVID-19,²⁵¹ influenza,²⁵² and natural disasters like extreme heat.^{253,254}

Additionally, proposals to fundamentally restructure CDC would set back years of work to develop partnerships and programs across the country. CDC serves as the primary source of funding, technical assistance, and accountability for public health and prevention programs. This work requires the unique and trusted relationships the agency has built with state, local, tribal, and territorial partners to carry out its health promotion and disease prevention mission.

Threats to the scientific integrity of public health agencies.

The politicization of public health measures and policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the spread of misinformation and disinformation, has led to increased skepticism, hostility toward, and a lack of trust in public health officials and agencies. The Government Accountability Office and other organizations cited multiple allegations of political interference with the scientific

integrity and communications of federal health agencies during the pandemic²⁵⁵ that undermined the credibility and public’s trust in these agencies. GAO defines “political interference” as political influences that seek to undermine impartiality, nonpartisanship, and professional judgment.²⁵⁶ Strengthening and providing greater clarity around the scientific integrity of federal agencies will help restore public trust.

Threats to trust in public health agencies and officials.

Restoring public trust in public health agencies, officials, and communications is a critical step to making the nation healthier and more prepared for the next crisis. Misinformation and disinformation on health issues have proliferated in recent years, with dangerous consequences. Increasing vaccine skepticism is among the most glaring examples of the impact of misinformation and subsequent waning trust in proven public health measures. Harassment of public health officials multiplied after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,²⁵⁷ harming the morale and contributing to the attrition of the public health workforce. Improving public health communications will help the American people make informed choices and better disregard misinformation. Building meaningful partnerships between health agencies and community leaders will help ensure community health needs are met.

TFAH’s policy recommendations would bolster the effectiveness of and trust in the nation’s public health agencies.

PROGRESS MILESTONES

- HHS issued a proposed updated HHS Scientific Integrity Policy in 2023 to establish clear policies and procedures to ensure the integrity of all aspects of HHS scientific activities. The draft included policies to prohibit scientific interference, to facilitate the free flow of scientific information, and forbidding censorship or alteration of scientific findings.²⁵⁸
- CDC conducted an agency-wide review of how the agency develops and deploys its science and of CDC's processes, systems, and structure. This review led to the launch of CDC Moving Forward in 2022. Major priorities included: share science and data faster; translate science into practical policy; prioritize health communications, with a focus on the American public; develop a CDC workforce ready to respond to future threats; and promote partnerships.²⁵⁹
- CDC reduced the scientific review clearance time for CDC publications by 50 percent.²⁶⁰
- In 2024, CDC overhauled and streamlined the CDC.gov website to make the site easier to navigate and provide relevant information to various audiences, including the American public.
- CDC reorganized the Director's Office of Communications to prioritize communication with the public and improve integration across the agency.
- FDA is implementing efforts to improve its approach to scientific communication to the public. The agency commissioned the Reagan-Udall Foundation for the FDA to provide actionable strategies for improving public understanding of FDA-regulated products.²⁶¹ Drawing on the Reagan-Udall Foundation report, the FDA launched the Building Public Trust Initiative, where a cross-discipline group of employees from across the FDA work to improve public understanding of the agency's work. Efforts include science language training, improved information sharing, and strategic work with partners and interested parties to improve reach of factual information. FDA also launched a Rumor Control webpage to provide facts in response to the growing spread of misinformation that is putting patients and consumers at risk.²⁶²
- CDC implemented and expanded the CDCReady responder program so internal CDC staff are trained and ready to mobilize in response to public health emergencies.
- HHS transitioned the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response into a new operating division within the department, the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response, similar to agencies like CDC and FDA. ASPR worked to make permanent capabilities developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the interagency HHS Coordination Operations and Response Element (known as "H-CORE") and the Countermeasures Acceleration Group, formerly known as Operation Warp Speed.
- The U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory on *Confronting Health Misinformation*, which recommends actions that individuals, educators, health professionals, media organizations, technology platforms, government, and others can do to identify and prevent the spread of health misinformation.²⁶³

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Administration and Congress should maintain the existing structure of federal health operating agencies, which have specific roles and expertise in protecting the nation's health.

Proposals to fundamentally alter CDC and other public health agencies are detrimental to promoting and protecting the public's health and would be an inefficient use of taxpayer dollars. These proposals would create needless divisions across programs that typically work together and lead to the loss of expertise of each agency's workforce.

The Administration should protect the scientific integrity of public health agencies and leaders. HHS should finalize and implement its updated Scientific Integrity Policy to ensure the independence, transparency, and accountability of scientific processes across the agency. The Administration and public health agencies should uphold scientific decision-making free from any real or perceived political interference. Policy decisions related to public health should be based on the best available science, with collaboration from public health experts in communication and policy to support transparent, clear, actionable, and options-based guidance.

HHS agencies should continue to prioritize development of public health guidance that is timely, rooted in science, and easy to understand and implement. Health agencies should ensure guidance is practicable in the real world by consulting relevant stakeholders and is not influenced

by politics. During emerging health threats, HHS agencies should clarify that guidance is based on the best available information and therefore will need to adapt as more evidence becomes available. Guidance may need to be adapted to different regions and audiences, including tribes and territories.

Congress and HHS should invest in and prioritize effective public health communications and reducing the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Agency communications with the public regarding health issues should be timely, clear, credible, and actionable by different audiences. Public health communications funding should include research into best practices for different audiences, creating mechanisms for effectively engaging and listening to communities, incorporating communications into planning and response, and modernizing communication channels. HHS and its agencies should engage with and provide resources to a diverse group of community partners and maintain a trusted messenger network to research and test effective messaging, counter and prevent misinformation and disinformation, assist in message development, and conduct outreach.

HHS programs and grantmaking agencies should encourage meaningful community partnerships in jurisdictions. Rebuilding trust between public health agencies and the communities they serve depends on providing authentic engagement

and partnering opportunities among public health agencies and community-based organizations and leadership. HHS and its awardees should direct resources to community organizations and networks to allow them to serve as trusted messengers, conduct outreach and education, advise public health departments, engage in planning, and/or provide relevant services.

HHS grantmaking agencies should streamline and harmonize program evaluation and collection of impact information. For example, HHS agencies should develop a portal for the collection of stories from grantees about the impact and value of public health work across the country.

Lawmakers and courts should reject laws that weaken or preempt public health authorities, which could threaten such basic public health protections as outbreak detection, vaccination, and response. To fulfill their core functions, public health agencies need authority to act effectively and efficiently to support the public's health including but not limited to collecting data to inform policy; administering programs and services including those that help to reduce the spread of disease; and investigating and controlling the spread of disease through testing, tracing, and other effective measures.²⁶⁴ Courts should strive to support public health authorities by continuing to uphold laws and policies that are reasonably related to public health and safety and properly balance the common good against constitutionally guaranteed individual rights.