

Joe Biden announces public-health funding boost amid COVID pandemic

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Philadelphia Health Commissioner Thomas Farley speaks with Third District City Councilmember Jamie Gauthier (right) at a community COVID-19 vaccination clinic run by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health in February. [Read more](#)TIM TAI / Staff Photographer

by William Wan, Washington Post

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WASHINGTON — The White House announced Thursday that it is investing \$7.4 billion to hire more public-health workers to deal with the coronavirus pandemic and future health crises. The money will come from the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, which Congress passed in March.

The funds could give a much-needed boost to America’s crumbling public-health infrastructure. After decades of chronic underfunding, U.S. public-health departments last year showed how ill-equipped they are to carry out basic functions, let alone serve as the last line of defense against the most acute threat to the nation’s health in generations.

The Biden administration said \$4.4 billion will go toward boosting states’ overstretched public-health departments, allowing them to hire disease specialists to do contact tracing, case management, and support outbreak investigations and school nurses to help schools reopen. Some of the money will also go to expanding the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — which plays a critical role in containing outbreaks.

The remaining \$3 billion will be used to create a new grant program to train and modernize the country’s public-health workforce. Applicants for those grants will be asked to prioritize recruiting staff from the communities they will serve, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds.



In the years before the pandemic struck, local public-health agencies had lost almost a quarter of their overall workforce since 2008 — a reduction of almost 60,000 workers, according to national associations of health officials. The agencies’ main source of federal funding — the CDC’s emergency preparedness budget — had been cut 30 percent since 2003.

A new report published this month by the nonprofit Trust for America’s Health found that the underfunding of U.S. public health played an outsized role in the country’s disastrous response.

In the wake of the pandemic, America has spent trillions of dollars. Much of that could have saved if the nation had just spent a few billion more on public health in the previous years, the report found.

“Unfortunately, a pattern has emerged: the country temporarily pays attention to public-health investment when there is a crisis and then moves on when the emergency passes,” the report concluded. “This boom-bust cycle has left the nation’s public-health infrastructure on weak footing.”

Among the report’s recommendations is that Congress establish an annual, regularly occurring \$4.5 billion infusion to public health to prepare for future crises, including the next pandemic.

A majority of America supports such funding, according to a poll released Thursday by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. The poll found 71% of the public favors substantially increasing federal spending on improving the nation’s public-health programs. In addition, 72% said they believe the activities of public-health agencies in the United States are extremely or very important to the health of the United States.

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