

CDC director announces reorganization of agency after COVID-19 debacle

Only cosmetic changes are being proposed

Benjamin Mateus
18 August 2022

On Wednesday, ahead of an unreleased internal review of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Director Rochelle Walensky admitted the CDC was responsible for “botching” the response and needed to be overhauled. Four months later, the CDC’s record now includes the fallout from its lackluster response to the monkeypox outbreak in the US.

The review was initiated on April 11 by former acting administrator of the Health Resources and Service Administration, Jim Macrae, with the involvement of three senior CDC officials—Dr. Deb Houry, acting principal deputy director, Robin Baily, chief operating officer, and Sherri Berger, chief of staff—and came on the heels of the incessant and compounding criticism of the agency’s handling of the pandemic during the Delta and then Omicron waves of infections.

Significantly, the review did not address the performance of the CDC during the first year of the pandemic, under the Trump administration, when some CDC officials were gagged by the White House because they tried to alert the public about the dangers from COVID-19. Then-CDC director Robert Redfield took a back seat to Trump’s quackery about hydroxychloroquine and other bogus solutions, and then to White House aides like Dr. Scott Atlas who promoted the anti-scientific policies of “herd immunity.”

When the review was commissioned, Walensky noted, “The lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the feedback I have received inside and outside the agency over the past year, indicate that it is time to take a step back and strategically position CDC to support the future of public health.”

Walensky, as a preemptive measure, said in a video distributed to 11,000 CDC employees, “To be frank, we are responsible for some pretty dramatic, pretty public mistakes, from testing to data to communications.” She noted that for the future survival of the public health agency, it would have to assimilate these lessons that have led to the public’s mistrust of the CDC’s ability to respond to a pandemic that has killed more than 1 million Americans. “This is our watershed moment. We must pivot,” she said.

There is no doubt that the CDC entirely failed in its responsibility to safeguard public health and shares culpability for the mass infection and death that were preventable, Walensky’s mea culpa, however, doesn’t square with the Biden

administration’s continuation of a pandemic policy that has essentially abrogated all measures to protect the population against infection and reinfection in line with its declaration of the “forever” COVID pandemic.

More than 210,000 Americans have died so far this year during the Omicron phase of the pandemic. With school reopening in full swing, the complete demasking of the country and record low numbers of vaccinations being administered, mass infections, hospitalizations and deaths are likely to explode this fall and winter, a threat that even the Biden administration has acknowledged while doing nothing about it.

The death toll for 2022 bears comparison with the preceding years. In 2020, more than 375,000 Americans died from COVID-19. In 2021, that figure rose substantially to over 475,000 despite Biden’s promise of following the science and having at his disposal the world’s premier vaccines. Under Walensky’s tenure at the CDC, close to 700,000 Americans have perished in barely 18 months.

Biden’s “declaration of independence” from the virus in the summer of 2021 and call for schools to open their doors was followed closely by the emergence of Delta and several iterations of Omicron. These were accompanied by the highest death rates among children from COVID-19. Yet, after each peak of infections, measures were quickly implemented to further erode any meaningful mitigation measures, which meant the CDC “pivoted” in step to the orchestrated messaging on the pandemic while ensuring unfettered economic activity.

As Evan Blake, writer for the *World Socialist Web Site* and coordinator of the Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic observed back in February, “The CDC, once a model for health agencies worldwide, has been totally integrated into the political establishment during the COVID-19 pandemic. As with both capitalist political parties, it serves the interests of the corporate and financial elites.”

The following timeline notes only the most obvious efforts by the CDC, acting as an agent of the state, to ensure pandemic response measures were lifted one by one.

The social distancing guidelines promoted by the CDC at the time endorsed the position that three feet was as safe as six feet based on distorted science. Yet, they quietly acknowledged on May 7, 2021, that SARS-CoV-2 could become airborne and

transmit beyond six feet. Yet, the CDC never made any public statements at the time on the implications of these acknowledgments to the public's safety.

Despite the accumulated evidence on the airborne nature of the virus since, the Biden administration, with the support of the CDC, rescinded masking guidelines on public transportation, including buses, trains and airplanes. It is the working class that depends most on such transit and this move placed them at immediate risk of infection and reinfections.

Only a week later, on May 13, 2021, the CDC Director said, "Anyone who is fully vaccinated can participate in indoor and outdoor activities, large or small, without wearing a mask or physical distancing."

But around the same time, the *Washington Post* leaked an internal document from researchers working at the CDC warning of mass community spread of COVID-19 among vaccinated people.

The unprecedented infection of US children was a byproduct of the CDC's guidelines released in July 2021 that encouraged vaccinated teachers and students not to wear masks even if they could not socially distance.

Also in July 2021, the CDC withheld critical data supplied from Israel that showed booster shots would be needed because vaccine effectiveness waned over time. Instead, CDC officials had been cherry-picking vital information to present an upbeat assessment of the state of the pandemic.

Amid the deadly Omicron wave in the winter of 2021–2022, the CDC changed the guidelines for assessing community risk, weighing hospitalizations and ICU beds, not infections, thereby changing the metrics that were the basis for public health guidance. The CDC quickly relaxed masking requirements, with Walensky adding, "We want to give people a break from things like mask-wearing."

In December 2021, at the behest of Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian, the CDC cut isolation times for those infected with COVID from 10 days to five days. Walensky said at the time that the change in guidelines was to "keep the critical functions of society open and operating."

In January 2022, Walensky made her infamous eugenicist remarks that it was "encouraging" that COVID-19 predominately kills people who are "unwell to begin with." In other words, the health and well-being of the most frail in society are inconsequential, but the profits of corporate industry must remain inviolable.

As the Omicron surge continued, the Biden administration and the CDC coordinated the "Test to Stay" program that allowed unvaccinated and exposed children to stay at school while their parents remained at work. More than 75 percent of all children in the US had been infected as part of these policies. Over 1,400 children have died, 200 this summer. The latest guidelines have scrapped even this meager restriction.

Worse, the CDC's analysis of Long COVID found one in five people under the age of 65 can develop the dreaded complication and recognized it as a mass disabling event. Numerous studies have been repeatedly cited on the impact of COVID-19 on the long-term health of children and adults.

Specifically, conditions like pulmonary embolism, respiratory insufficiency, diabetes, cardiac dysfunction, psychosis and seizures, circulatory problems, can afflict those previously infected. Yet, not once has Walensky considered the extant scientific evidence in any of her remarks and decisions on the CDC's recommendations on the pandemic.

Many thousands of dedicated public health workers work at the CDC. They have faced a merciless right-wing attack denouncing any scientific approach to the pandemic and demanding that schools and businesses should never be closed, that no restrictions like mask mandates and lockdowns should ever be imposed. While using the language of individual "freedom," the real aim is to safeguard the profits of giant corporations while minimizing state expenditure on public health measures.

The criticism of the CDC from the socialist left is diametrically opposite that of the capitalist ultra-right. We maintain that CDC scientists and health workers have been gagged and their work suppressed. Instead of science guiding the policies of the Trump and Biden administrations, it is profits. There is no hint of such a critique in the mealy-mouthed comments of Walensky & Co.

The corporate media has given a generally positive response to the shakeup that is underway at the CDC. Yet not one report took the Biden administration or Dr. Walensky to task on their abysmal record or offered an analysis of their repeated but deliberate missteps.

Indeed, the restructuring at the CDC is intended to align the agency more efficiently with the demands of the state and prevent any exposure of bureaucratic lethargy from exposing the class policies of the Biden administration and Wall Street as a whole.

The failure of the CDC is not merely an American phenomenon, but characterizes the public health agencies in every capitalist country, with the exception of China. The 2021 Global Health Security Index report offers critical findings. It found that most countries were "dangerously unprepared for meeting future epidemic and pandemic threats ... most countries, including high-income nations, have not made dedicated financial investments in strengthening epidemic or pandemic preparedness. Most countries saw little or no improvement in maintaining a robust, capable, and accessible health system for outbreak detection and response. Political and security risks have increased in nearly all countries, and those with the fewest resources have the highest risk and greatest preparedness gap."

Given such universal findings, it is clear that it is not specific governments, presidents or prime ministers that bear the ultimate responsibility. It is the capitalist system, and the subordination of public health and the survival of tens of millions of people to profit interests, that has cleared the way for pandemics and unending waves of suffering and death.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact