

Amid measles outbreak in Texas and the rising danger of H5N1 bird flu

Trump and Kennedy fire 5,200 HHS workers and gut the Epidemic Intelligence Service

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On Friday, just one day after the confirmation of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. to head the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the agency announced the firing of up to 5,200 employees. Of these, 1,300 are employed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) suffering the next highest number of job cuts.

The CDC's legendary Epidemic Intelligence Service, whose top talent hunt pathogens globally and work tirelessly to prevent new epidemics and pandemics, is slated for near-total elimination.

Kennedy, a vicious opponent of vaccines and public health more broadly, is rapidly fulfilling his campaign promise to "give infectious disease a break for about eight years." This marks a dangerous turn for public health amid a recent upsurge in numerous infectious diseases, including one of the deadliest influenza seasons in more than a decade, alongside the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the growing threat of an H5N1 "bird flu" pandemic.

The outbreak of measles in a small Texas town in Gaines County (population 21,598), located on the western border of the state, is particularly ominous. The county has seen its vaccination rates plummet as nearly 14 percent of K-12 students had a vaccine exemption in the 2023-2024 school year. According to state data from last year, only 82 percent of kindergartners in the county received the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccinations.

However, Gaines County is not just an outlier in Texas but a harbinger of what should be expected as the purveyors of anti-science and total quackery have commandeered the institutions of public health to do whatever they please. According to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), the percentage of Texas children that have been exempted statewide over the last decade has climbed from 0.76 percent to 2.32 percent.

Laura Anton, spokesperson for the DSHS, warned that the actual number of unvaccinated children is probably much higher, as many are home schooled and their vaccination data are unreported to the state. She wrote in a statement, "Due to the highly contagious nature of this disease, additional cases are likely to occur in Gaines County and the surrounding communities."

Since January 23, 2025, when the first two cases had been identified, another 22 cases had been reported as of February 11, 2025. Of the 24 total so far, only two were in adults. Zach Holbrook, executive director of the South Plains Public Health District, told media that there are now at least 14 hospitalizations, predominantly children, with many spending time in the ICU. Given that one in five people with the highly contagious measles infection will require care in a hospital, this suggests that the outbreak is far greater than the current figures would indicate.

Holbrook noted, "There may be active cases out there and the individual has chosen not to seek medical attention." Rekha Lakshmanan, chief strategy officer for The Immunization Partnership in Houston lamented, "We are going to see more kids infected. We will see more families taking time off from work, more kids in the hospital. This is the tip of the iceberg."

Texas and other states have actively promoted bills that allow parents to more readily obtain exemptions while preventing employers (private and public) from mandating vaccines for their workers, such as anti-COVID vaccines. Overworked doctors and health care providers will take on even more administrative burdens in terms of documentation and consenting for these vaccines or face penalties from the state. Schools, where much of the public can get basic information on public health matters, will be forced to remove references to vaccines in their curriculum.

That the CDC's webpages have recently been dismantled

and their weekly publication, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, was suspended, speaks to the real and growing danger of censorship on this front. The report, until recently, had been published every week since 1961. It garners more than 17 million page views each year and is one of the most heavily cited reports on a broad range of health topics to include infectious diseases. In a *New England Journal of Medicine* perspective published on Wednesday, the three editors-in-chief of the CDC report explained the gravity of these attacks:

A crucial concern about the pause imposed by the Trump administration is not only its effect on the MMWR, but also the potential effect on other public health communications from the CDC, including Health Alert Network messages about emerging threats, new travel advisories, and communications with state and local health departments and other health agencies. As a result, critical and timely health information that is needed to prevent disease and save lives has been disrupted. Communications from the NIH and the FDA were also paused, causing disruptions in the review of research grants and potential delays in drug approvals. This disruption of communications from the CDC and other health agencies is far-reaching, potentially with serious consequences for the public's health...

Threats to public health are ubiquitous and continuous and pose risks to our economy and national security. Recent information on H5N1 influenza virus in chickens and now cows, with limited spread to humans, is sounding alarms. One of the largest outbreaks of tuberculosis in U.S. history is ongoing in Kansas, and the reemergence of Ebola in Uganda could lead to its importation into the United States. The ongoing existing and potential threats to the health of the U.S. population underscore the reality that we cannot afford a cessation of data-driven updates from our country's lead public health agency.

Indeed, the US is facing one of the most severe flu seasons in recent decades, with more than 24 million cases since October and an estimated 650,000 hospitalizations, three times higher than official COVID-19 hospitalizations at present. The CDC has estimated that weekly deaths from flu have reached two percent of all deaths nationwide, while COVID-19 accounted for 1.5 percent. However, the medical community is at a loss for why the current season has been

so severe. Some speculate that it may be indicative of the immune impairment which studies have shown can take place after COVID-19 infection.

At the same time, pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is on the rise. There were at least 360 cases last week nationwide, a 27 percent increase from the previous week. In 2024, the CDC confirmed at least a dozen deaths, marking one of the highest rates since a 2017 surge of illnesses. In a statement issued by the CDC, it was said: "People of all ages are at risk for getting pertussis. Everyone who is not up to date with whooping cough vaccination should get vaccinated." Whooping cough was one of the "germs" that was suppressed by the limited public health measures adopted in 2020-21 against COVID-19, underscoring the ability to prevent the transmission of any respiratory pathogens through masking, in particular.

Dr. Marcos Mestre, chief of clinical operations at Nicklaus Children's Health System in Miami, Florida, the state recently hit hard by the bacterial infection, told CBS News, "We have been seeing some increase in pertussis cases that are coming through our emergency departments. Not necessarily requiring admission but coming in for evaluation and treatment." However, younger babies who are at higher risk of complications due to narrower trachea are "coughing to the point that they can't catch their breath. And those are the children we really worry about, when infants are getting infected and that could cause more severe illness."

With the threat posed by the bird flu remaining unchecked, the state of pandemic preparedness has never been so dire as Kennedy assumes the mantle as health secretary. The deepening current surges of measles, whooping cough, flu, and the ongoing COVID pandemic are testimony to the political reaction that characterizes this period and capitalism's turn to fascistic forms of rule.



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