

Great Barrington Declaration author Jay Bhattacharya takes control of CDC as measles cases surge

Benjamin Mateus
22 February 2026

On Tuesday, the Trump administration confirmed that National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Jay Bhattacharya will assume the additional role of acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Bhattacharya replaces Jim O’Neill, who had been serving simultaneously as acting CDC director and deputy secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. O’Neill left the post on Feb. 13 and is expected to be nominated by President Donald Trump to lead the National Science Foundation.

Bhattacharya’s dual appointment to head the NIH and CDC places the nation’s disease surveillance apparatus under the stewardship of one of its most vocal critics. It is, in practical terms, a fox guarding the henhouse. A Stanford health economist with no formal training in public health administration and no experience directing infectious disease response, Bhattacharya now oversees both the federal government’s primary biomedical research agency and its leading disease monitoring institution.

His primary qualification for this wrecking operation stems from his role during the COVID-19 pandemic as a leading propagandist for the mass infection policies demanded by Wall Street. In October 2020, Bhattacharya co-authored the notorious Great Barrington Declaration at the libertarian American Institute for Economic Research, a right-wing think tank tied to billionaire oligarchs like Charles Koch. The declaration advocated for the pseudoscientific policy of “herd immunity,” demanding that the virus be allowed to spread unchecked among the working class, young and supposedly healthy, falsely claiming that the elderly and vulnerable could somehow be shielded through “focused protection.”

In effect, the Great Barrington Declaration reframed mass exposure as a defensible public health strategy and provided the pseudo-intellectual scaffolding necessary to prevent scientific institutions from imposing any measures—such as lockdowns, school closures or workplace safety

mandates—that might impede the economic functioning of the capitalist state. By placing Bhattacharya at the helm of the CDC, the administration ensures that this policy of social murder, which subordinates human life to private profit, becomes the institutionalized baseline for the era of pandemics.

By appointing Bhattacharya to lead both the NIH and CDC, the administration has placed a single official in charge of the nation’s largest biomedical research funder and its primary disease surveillance agency. This is not merely administrative overlap. It centralizes control over research funding and public health guidance at a moment when both institutions are already destabilized, reinforcing the administration’s ideological direction and deepening the paralysis of agencies confronting active infectious disease threats—including the nationwide resurgence of measles, ongoing COVID-19 transmission, seasonal influenza and the growing risk of bird flu spillover.

This transition follows a year in which the CDC operated without a permanent Senate-confirmed director, except for a brief 28-day period last summer. That short tenure belonged to Susan Monarez, who was fired by HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. after she refused to approve changes to the childhood vaccination schedule that she believed lacked scientific justification. Her dismissal triggered a significant exodus of senior career staff.

After Monarez’s departure, the CDC was placed under O’Neill, a former venture capital executive and protégé of billionaire Peter Thiel with no medical or public health training. During his tenure, the agency advanced Kennedy’s revisions to the childhood immunization schedule, reducing the number of vaccines recommended universally and shifting responsibility for infectious disease protection onto individual families.

The epidemiological consequences of this collapse in trust have been disastrous. As immunization coverage declines, preventable diseases are resurging. CDC data show that

vaccination coverage among U.S. kindergartners has fallen to 92.5 percent, below the 95 percent level required to sustain herd immunity for measles. In 2025, the United States recorded 2,281 confirmed measles cases, the highest annual total in more than three decades. By mid-February 2026, 982 cases had already been reported—more than four times the number at the same point last year—placing the country on track to surpass last year’s total well before year’s end.

Public trust in the CDC has eroded sharply following the administration’s overhaul of immunization policy. A recent KFF poll found that fewer than half of Americans now trust the agency to provide reliable information on vaccines.

The timing of Bhattacharya’s dual appointment is shaped by constraints of the Federal Vacancies Reform Act, which allows a position requiring Senate confirmation to be filled on an acting basis for 210 days. Because Monarez was dismissed in late August 2025, that period expires on March 25. However, the administration retains mechanisms to extend acting control without securing Senate confirmation. A pending nomination allows an acting official to remain in place indefinitely; if rejected or withdrawn, a new 210-day period begins.

Public health experts warn that the administration has little interest in installing a Senate-confirmed director. Richard Besser, a former acting CDC director, observed that “if someone like Susan Monarez could not survive more than a matter of weeks in the role, then I don’t believe that anyone with scientific credibility and a conscience could make it.”

O’Neill and the assault on basic science

O’Neill’s planned nomination to lead the NSF signals the consolidation of influence over another major scientific institution. The NSF, with a budget of nearly \$9 billion, is the primary federal funder of nonbiomedical basic science and engineering.

The move follows a sweeping assault on the agency throughout 2025. Last April, NSF Director Sethuraman Panchanathan resigned after a White House directive terminated around 1,000 research grants. The cuts targeted climate science, diversity initiatives and public health research. The administration froze new grant awards and proposed reducing the agency’s budget by 57 percent.

According to a Science analysis of Office of Personnel Management data, the NSF has lost about 40 percent of its STEM Ph.D. workforce—205 of 517 Ph.D. staff—in just eleven months of 2025. Union data indicate the CDC has

shed roughly a quarter of its workforce under Trump and Kennedy. Of the 27 institutes and centers that make up NIH, 16 are currently without permanent directors.

O’Neill does not arrive at a stable scientific body but at one already stripped of personnel, continuity and internal dissent. If confirmed, he would be the first NSF director in history without an advanced degree in science or engineering. His background lies in venture capital and political networks aligned with Peter Thiel and the libertarian right.

This anti-science, deregulatory zeal is most starkly expressed in O’Neill’s radical views on drug approval. In a 2014 address, he argued that the Food and Drug Administration should abandon its requirement that pharmaceutical companies demonstrate their medications are effective before approval. He proposed that drugs be cleared based on safety alone, allowing patients to use them “at their own risk” and leaving the market to determine efficacy after distribution. Such a position would dismantle the modern clinical trial framework and shift the burden of proof from manufacturers to the public, who would become test subjects for untested pharmaceuticals.

Placing a venture capitalist who has publicly questioned core regulatory safeguards at the helm of the NSF carries serious implications for the nation’s scientific infrastructure. Under such leadership, funding priorities could shift away from foundational basic research toward commercially aligned projects, eroding the scientific capacity required to anticipate emerging biological threats and support the discovery of medicines that extend and improve human life.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact