

GUEST ESSAY

We Ran the C.D.C.: Kennedy Is Endangering Every American's Health

Sept. 1, 2025

 Listen to this article · 7:11 min [Learn more](#)

By Richard Besser, Mandy K. Cohen, William Foege, Tom Frieden, Jeffrey Koplan, William Roper, David Satcher, Anne Schuchat and Rochelle P. Walensky

The authors previously led the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as directors or acting directors under Republican and Democratic administrations.

We have each had the honor and privilege of serving as director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, either in a permanent or an acting capacity, dating back to 1977. Collectively, we spent more than 100 years working at the C.D.C., the world's pre-eminent public health agency. We served under multiple Republican and Democratic administrations — every president from Jimmy Carter to Donald Trump — alongside thousands of dedicated staff members who shared our commitment to saving lives and improving health.

What the health and human services secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., has done to the C.D.C. and to our nation's public health system over the past several months — culminating in his decision to fire Susan Monarez as C.D.C. director days ago — is unlike anything we had ever seen at the agency and unlike anything our country had ever experienced.

Mr. Kennedy has fired thousands of federal health workers and severely weakened programs designed to protect Americans from cancer, heart attacks, strokes, lead poisoning, injury, violence and more. Amid the largest measles outbreak in the United States in a generation, he's focused on unproven treatments while downplaying vaccines. He canceled investments in promising medical research that will leave us ill prepared for future health emergencies. He replaced experts on federal health advisory committees with unqualified individuals who share his dangerous and unscientific views. He announced the end of U.S. support for global vaccination programs that protect millions of children and keep Americans safe, citing flawed research and making inaccurate statements. And he championed federal legislation that will cause millions of people with health insurance through Medicaid to lose their coverage. Firing Dr. Monarez — which led to the resignations of top C.D.C. officials — adds considerable fuel to this raging fire.

We are worried about the wide-ranging impact that all these decisions will have on America's health security. Residents of rural communities and people with disabilities will have even more limited access to health care. Families with low incomes who rely most heavily on community health clinics and support from state and local health departments will have fewer resources available to them. Children risk losing access to lifesaving vaccines because of the cost.

This is unacceptable, and it should alarm every American, regardless of political leanings.

The C.D.C. is an agency under the Department of Health and Human Services. During our C.D.C. tenures, we did not always agree with our leaders, but they never gave us reason to doubt that they would rely on data-driven insights for our protection or that they would support public health workers. We need only look to Operation Warp Speed during the first Trump administration — which produced highly effective and safe vaccines that saved millions of lives during the Covid-19 pandemic — as a shining example of what Health and Human Services can accomplish when health and science are at the forefront of its mission.

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

The current department leadership, however, operates under a very different set of rules. When Mr. Kennedy administered the oath of office to Dr. Monarez on July 31, he called her “a public health expert with unimpeachable scientific credentials.” But when she refused weeks later to rubber-stamp his dangerous and unfounded vaccine recommendations or heed his demand to fire senior C.D.C. staff members, he decided she was expendable.

These are not typical requests from a health secretary to a C.D.C. director. Not even close. None of us would have agreed to the secretary's demands, and we applaud Dr. Monarez for standing up for the agency and the health of our communities.

When the C.D.C. was created in 1946, the average life expectancy in the United States was around 66 years. Today it is more than 78 years. While medical advances have helped, it is public health that has played the biggest role in improving both the length and the quality of life in our nation. The C.D.C. has led efforts to eradicate smallpox, increase access to lifesaving vaccinations and significantly reduce smoking rates. The agency is also on the front lines in communities across the country, delivering crucial but often less visible wins — such as containing an outbreak of H.I.V. cases in Scott County, Ind., and protecting residents in East Palestine, Ohio, from toxic chemical exposure.

The C.D.C. is not perfect. What institution is? But over its history, regardless of which party has controlled the White House or Congress, the agency has not wavered from its mission. To those on the C.D.C. staff who continue to perform their jobs heroically in the face of the excruciating circumstances, we offer our sincere thanks and appreciation. Their ongoing dedication is a model for all of us. But it's clear that the agency is hurting badly. The loss of Dr. Monarez and other top leaders will make it far more difficult for the C.D.C. to do what it has done for about 80 years: work around the clock to protect Americans from threats to their lives and health.

We have a message for the rest of the nation as well. This is a time to rally to protect the health of every American. Congress must exercise its oversight authority over Health and Human Services. State and local governments must fill funding gaps where they can. Philanthropy and the private sector must step up their community investments. Medical groups must continue to stand up for science and truth. Physicians must continue to support their patients with sound guidance and empathy.

And each of us must do what public health does best: look out for one another.

The men and women who have joined the C.D.C. across generations have done so not for prestige or power but because they believe deeply in the call to service. They deserve a health and human services secretary who stands up for health, supports science and has their back. So, too, does our country.

Dr. Richard Besser served as acting director of the C.D.C. in 2009. Dr. Mandy Cohen served as director of the C.D.C. from 2023 to 2025. Dr. William Foege served as director of the C.D.C. from 1977 to 1983. Dr. Tom Frieden served as director of the C.D.C. from 2009 to 2017. Dr. Jeffrey Koplan served as director of the C.D.C. from 1998 to 2002. Dr. William Roper served as director of the C.D.C. from 1990 to 1993. Dr. David Satcher served as director of the C.D.C. from 1993 to 1998. Dr. Anne Schuchat served as acting director of the C.D.C. in 2017 and 2018. Dr. Rochelle Walensky served as director of the C.D.C. from 2021 to 2023.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Bluesky, WhatsApp and Threads.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 18 of the New York edition with the headline: Kennedy Is Endangering Every American's Health