Federal Cuts Imperil the Collection of Data on HIV, Cancer, STIs and More

RFK Jr. purged many teams that collect public health data, making the nation more vulnerable to outbreaks and illness. But here's some good news from Texas.

April 15, 2025 By Trent Straube

As part of federal budget cuts and restructuring, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has fired numerous teams of experts who track national health data, including statistics on HIV, cancer, asthma, abortion, sexual violence, IVF treatments, alcohol-related deaths and drug-resistant gonorrhea, Politico reports.

What's more, it appears there is no plan to preserve the data and knowledge accrued by these teams nor to share it with any incoming employees or restructured agencies.

This puts the nation at increased risk for outbreaks and illness. "Surveillance capabilities are crucial for identifying emerging health issues, directing resources efficiently and evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies," Jerome Adams, MD, MPH, who served as the surgeon general during Trump's first administration, told Politico. "Without robust data and surveillance systems, we cannot accurately assess whether we are truly making America healthier."

In addition to massive layoffs, budget cuts at the Department of Health and Human Services have resulted in the shuttering of entire laboratories and offices, including those that oversaw the Sickle Cell Data Collection Program, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System and the National Firefighter Registry for Cancer. (For recent examples of health stories on the latter topic, see "Electric Vehicle Fires Raise Cancer Risk for Firefighters and Communities," "Future of Cancer Coverage for Women Federal Firefighters Uncertain Under Trump" and "Los Angeles Firefighters Face Increased Cancer Risk.")

One abruptly shuttered federal lab was home to scientists who gathered samples of gonorrhea and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and kept tabs on their genetic data, which is vital for tracking potential mutations and drug resistance.

"Whoever got rid of the lab just doesn't understand how important the lab is," an anonymous expert told the New York Times. STIs are on the rise across the United States, including congenital syphilis. About 4,000 babies were born with the infection in 2023, the newspaper reports, and nearly 600,000 cases of gonorrhea were reported the same year. Alarmingly, the bacteria that

causes gonorrhea is becoming resistant to known treatments, making surveillance data and research all the more important.

RFK Jr. has also fired experts who tracked the number of children born with HIV, the levels of lead in children's blood and how many people living with HIV are on medication and maintain viral suppression. Tracking people with HIV is important because people with the virus who achieve and maintain viral suppression experience slower disease progression, enjoy better overall health and are less likely to develop opportunistic illnesses. Plus, they don't transmit HIV to others through sex, which is known as treatment as prevention, or Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U).

"If you don't understand what are the needs for HIV prevention, then you don't understand what types of services to provide or how to direct those services to reach the greatest number of people," an anonymous employee who specializes in HIV at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) told Politico. "That's the big danger."

Currently, public health statistics are mostly still available online—for example, on CDC.gov. But advocates worry this won't remain the case—and not only because emerging statistics will not be gathered and interpreted but also because the digital systems used by the health department are themselves in danger of collapsing, thanks to the purging of IT specialists, administrative staff and cybersecurity teams. As an anonymous source to Wired: "Pretty soon, within the next couple of weeks, everything regarding IT and cyber at the [health] department will start to operationally reach a point of no return."

Regarding STIs and HIV, a glimmer of good news arrives from Texas. State Representative Venton Jones, who is gay and HIV positive, introduced House Bill 50, which would make HIV tests a routine part of STI screenings. The bill passed unanimously in the House Committee on Public Health, reports the Dallas Voice, and now goes to the full House for a vote.

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A post shared by State Representative Venton Jones (@ventonjonestx)

“This is a major step forward for public health in Texas, and I’m grateful to my colleagues for their continued support,” Jones said. “This simple no-cost change will help ensure more Texans know their status, connect to lifesaving care sooner and ultimately reduce HIV transmission across our state.”

For related headlines, see “Texas Lawmaker Who is Black, Gay and HIV Positive Proposed to His Partner in State Capitol,” “Federal Health Department Reorganizes and Slashes Staff,” “Significant HHS Workforce Reductions and Restructuring Threaten the Fight Against Cancer” and “Activists March in NYC to Protest ‘Death by 1,000 Musk Cuts.’”

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