

ARTICLE

What is the federal government's public health response to COVID-19?

BY ERLC STAFF

March 20, 2020

On Jan. 31, 2020, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar declared a nationwide Public Health Emergency in response to the novel coronavirus outbreak, the virus that causes COVID-19. Since then, various agencies of the U.S. government have begun working on a public health response. And on March 13, 2020, President Trump declared a National Emergency (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-declaring-national-emergency-concerning-novel-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-outbreak/>) concerning the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak.

Listed below are the primary agencies responsible for addressing this public health crisis at the federal level.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a part of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), is the nation's health protection agency. The role of the CDC is to conduct critical science and provide health information to both protect the United States against dangerous health threats and respond when such threats arise.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique threat, there is an abundance of [pandemic guidance \(https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/pandemic-preparedness-resources.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/pandemic-preparedness-resources.html) developed in anticipation of an influenza pandemic that is being adapted for the novel coronavirus.

In January, the CDC established both a COVID-19 Incident Management System and activated its Emergency Operations Center to better provide ongoing support to the COVID-19 response. The CDC is currently studying the virus, both in the U.S. and across the globe, and helping communities respond locally.

For example, [CDC has grown the COVID-19 virus in cell culture \(https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/grows-virus-cell-culture.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/grows-virus-cell-culture.html) (a necessary step for further studies), developed an rRT-PCR test to diagnose COVID-19, and is also developing a [serology test \(https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/testing.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/testing.html). CDC has deployed teams to support state health departments in the areas of case identification, contact tracing, clinical management, and public

communications. As part of the agency's public communications, CDC has issued [clinical guidance \(https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/index.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/index.html) and guidance for other settings, including [schools, community events, and mass gatherings \(https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/index.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/index.html).

Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority

The Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA), part of the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, was established to aid in securing our nation from chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) threats, as well as from pandemic influenza (PI) and emerging infectious diseases (EID).

BARDA supports the transition of medical countermeasures such as vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics from research through advanced development toward consideration for approval by the FDA and inclusion into the Strategic National Stockpile.

In response to COVID-19, [BARDA has expanded \(https://www.phe.gov/emergency/events/COVID19/Pages/default.aspx\)](https://www.phe.gov/emergency/events/COVID19/Pages/default.aspx) its existing public-private partnerships to develop medical countermeasures to enhance health security by [creating vaccines and therapeutic treatments \(https://www.phe.gov/emergency/events/COVID19/Pages/BARDA.aspx\)](https://www.phe.gov/emergency/events/COVID19/Pages/BARDA.aspx).

BARDA is also working to acquire [500 million N95 respirators](#)

<https://beta.sam.gov/opp/406d8af718e143798530f905e8bebd15/view>), a type of personal protective equipment that protects healthcare workers from becoming contaminated by liquid and airborne particles.

This agency has also [issued several public health and medical emergency declarations and waivers](#)

<https://www.phe.gov/emergency/events/COVID19/Pages/2019-Public-Health-and-Medical-Emergency-Declarations-and-Waivers.aspx>) to streamline efforts to fight the virus.

Department of Energy

The mission of the Department of Energy (DOE) is to “ensure America’s security and prosperity by addressing its energy, environmental and nuclear challenges through transformative science and technology solutions.” COVID-19 is being researched at the National Labs, which are managed by DOE.

Many of the National Laboratories have experts who can plot COVID-19 infections and [develop models for how and where it is spreading](#) (<https://www.energy.gov/articles/how-doe-and-our-labs-are-combating-covid-19>). The labs also have the capability to screen and test potential drugs to treat the disease, and to coordinate and expand access for coronavirus research.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration

The [role of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) (<https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/mcm-issues/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19#fdarole>) in this crisis is to facilitate

the development and availability of medical countermeasures that can be used to diagnose, prevent, or treat COVID-19.

The agency is also responsible for protecting the safety of the nation's blood supply and human cells, tissues, and cellular/tissue-based products (HCT/Ps) for transplantation. According to the FDA (<https://www.fda.gov/vaccines-blood-biologics/safety-availability-biologics/important-information-blood-establishments-regarding-novel-coronavirus-outbreak>), routine blood donor screening measures that are already in place should prevent individuals with clinical respiratory infections from donating blood.

The FDA is also working to protect consumers against fraudulent products that falsely claim to prevent, treat, or cure COVID-19.

The Department of Defense

The Department of Defense (DOD) is providing (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/us/politics/coronavirus-government-army-corps.html>) HHS with up to 5 million N95 masks, as well as making 2,000 ventilators available for hospitals.

The agency is also activating the Navy hospital ships USNS Mercy and USNS Comfort (<https://news.usni.org/2020/03/17/pentagon-preparing-navy-hospital-ships-mercy-comfort-for-coronavirus-response>) as part of the DOD's domestic response to the spreading COVID-19 virus. Each ship has a 1,000-bed capacity and is manned by military medical personnel. The doctors and staff will require about a week or more to mobilize, and will be partially pulled from civilian medical facilities.

(State and local authorities also have a primary role in protecting public health. To see what states are doing in response, check their [individual Health Department website \(https://www.usa.gov/state-health\)](https://www.usa.gov/state-health).)

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