As Biden Gets Sworn In, White House Will Get Scrubbed Down

A team of specially trained cleaners will be lifting their hands to disinfect the White House.

December 30, 2020 By Kaiser Health News and Phil Galewitz

It was a down-in-the-mud presidential campaign, but the dirtiest part comes on Inauguration Day.

As Joe Biden lifts his right hand to take the oath of office at noon on Jan. 20 at the Capitol, a team of specially trained cleaners will be lifting their hands to disinfect the White House.

The executive mansion will get a deep clean after two COVID-19 outbreaks this fall led to President Donald Trump and members of his staff and family becoming infected.

The departure of one president and the arrival of another is always a fast but highly synchronized behind-the-scenes ballet by White House staff members and moving crews.

But this year is different. The shift means more than rearranging the Oval Office and putting new clothes in bedroom closets: It means a top-to-bottom disinfection amid a pandemic. Biden, who at 78 is taking office as the oldest president in U.S. history, is at high risk of complications from the virus.

So, the General Services Administration will oversee a thorough cleaning and disinfection of every doorknob, toilet handle, light switch, stair railing, telephone, elevator button, computer keyboard and other objects inside the 55,000-square-foot mansion at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

But can such a large building get fully clean in just five or six hours?

Experts say that should not be a problem with a large enough team and preparation time.

K. Mark Wiencek, lead microbiologist for South Carolina-based Contec Inc., which sells cleaning supplies to hospitals, said GSA cleaners should focus on the rooms last occupied by the Trump staff, since the virus can’t survive long on surfaces. Cleaning crews, he added, should wear masks and gloves to protect themselves and not introduce any germs.

He recommended replacing the air filters and using fogging and spraying disinfectant to kill viruses.

The GSA said it is already cleaning the White House East Wing and West Wing offices daily with disinfectant.

GSA officials said they expect no difficulties in making the transition and pledged that all furniture and surfaces would be cleaned. “GSA will thoroughly clean and disinfect the building spaces between the administrations and ensure that everything is up to standard,” a spokesperson said in a statement.

It’s vital that cleaners leave the cleaning chemicals on surfaces a full 10 minutes before wiping them down, said O.P. Almaraz, a disaster relief expert in West Covina, California, and president of Allied Restoration, which has cleaned dozens of businesses after suspected COVID cases.

“With a large enough crew, a professional disinfection company could apply disinfectants to the entire White House in six hours,” he said. It’s important, he explained, that the crew pay “special attention to points that may be touched often, like tabletops, door handles and light switches.”

As long as cleaners have an organized plan for each room, Almaraz doesn’t see them having trouble getting done before the Bidens move in at the end of the day.

Sheldon Yellen, CEO of Michigan-based Belfor Property Restoration, said cleaning crews need to be rehearsed and in fully ventilated suits to clean the White House in one afternoon.

“It’s a level 3 clean,” he said, noting the building needs the most intensive service because of confirmed COVID cases. That means disposing of anything that doesn’t have to stay for the Bidens, including pillows and bedsheets. He said books need to be wiped down, not just on the binding but all sides. He recommended cleaning the ductwork and ventilation systems as well.

Jack Shevel, co-founder of San Diego disinfection company Zappogen, said that because COVID-19 spreads by airborne transmission, it is best to disinfect using an electrostatic sprayer or fogger filled with a disinfectant designed to kill airborne pathogens. That covers a large area more easily than just wiping surfaces.

“To truly disinfect all those rooms quickly and thoroughly, they should be sprayed with a fine micron mist that can reach all crevices and surfaces evenly,” he said.

Still, the White House cleaners must be careful to remove paintings, antiques and other valuable items before spraying with disinfectant, said Ernesto Abel-Santos, professor of biochemistry at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Those items should be cleaned by hand.

Abel-Santos said a simple alcohol-based disinfectant should be enough to kill the COVID virus. Although the virus can be detected on some surfaces for days, it typically degrades within hours. People are much more likely to be infected by droplets expelled when someone coughs, sneezes or talks.

During the turnover, cleaners should focus on the most commonly used areas of the building, he

said, such as the Oval Office and bedrooms. “The rest can get deep-cleaned as needed,” he added.

Even more important than cleaning, however, is asking the new president and his family and staff to physically distance, wear their masks and wash their hands, according to Abel-Santos.

“You don’t realize how many times in a day you touch your face with your hands,” he said. “If you touch a surface and then touch your face, it increases the probability of contagion.”

Subscribe to KHN’s free Morning Briefing.

This article was originally published on December 21, 2020, by Kaiser Health News. It is republished with permission. Kaiser Health News, a nonprofit health newsroom whose stories appear in news outlets nationwide, is an editorially independent part of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.covidhealth.com/article/biden-gets-sworn-white-house-will-get-scrubbed