Former FDA Leader With HIV Background to Spearhead COVID-19 Efforts

David Kessler will helm Operation Warp Speed as AIDS activists urge the United States to supply the world with COVID-19 vaccines.

January 15, 2021 By Trent Straube

President-elect Joe Biden has wasted no time in corralling a team of experts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. He named David Kessler, MD, JD, to head Operation Warp Speed, the program tasked with expediting vaccines and treatments for the novel coronavirus, The New York Times reports.

Through his work in the early years of the AIDS epidemic, Kessler gained experience accelerating the drug approval process. He headed the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) from 1990 to 1997 under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. During his tenure, Kessler oversaw FDA efforts to speed the development and approval of antivirals to treat HIV, notably a class of meds known as protease inhibitors. (Effective treatment for HIV became a reality in 1996.)

> .@DavidAKesslerMD gets picked to run Operation Warp Speed. A Bush Sr. FDA commish, we learned to get things done with him in the early 1990s. This isn't his first pandemic. This is a smart choice. https://t.co/F9bl0dm1wx
>
> — Gregg Gonsalves (@gregggonsalves) January 15, 2021

“We learned to get things done with him in the early 1990s,” tweeted Gregg Gonsalves, an AIDS activist from the early days of the epidemic and now an associate professor at Yale, regarding Kessler’s new post. “This isn’t his first pandemic. This is a smart choice.”

At the FDA, Kessler worked alongside Anthony Fauci, MD, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, to develop HIV meds. Fauci has, of course, been one of the nation’s leading experts on COVID-19. (For more about him, see the POZ profile “Experts Matter” and “Activist Peter Staley Has Unmasked Dr. Tony Fauci and It Is Fabulous.”)

Kessler takes over Operation Warp Speed as the nation is stumbling in its efforts to produce the FDA-approved COVD-19 vaccines. As the Times pointed out, President Trump had promised to vaccinate 20 million people by the end of 2020, but just over 11 million inoculations have been given.

The World Is Desperate for More #COVID19 #Vaccines — and @jbkrell @peterstaley and @ICAP_ColumbiaU Wafaa El-Sadr outline “PEPVAR”, to do for COVID what @PEPFAR has done for #HIV. https://t.co/8JLAkYSxXC

— AVAC (@HIVpxresearch) January 13, 2021

News of Kessler’s appointment arrives just three days after the newspaper ran an opinion piece titled “The World Is Desperate for More Covid Vaccines” penned by AIDS activists James Krellenstein, Peter Staley and Wafaa M. El-Sadr, MD, MPH. They made the case that the United States should launch a program to supply the world with COVID-19 vaccines, similar to what the nation did with HIV meds.

“President-elect Joe Biden,” they wrote, “can solve the U.S. and worldwide vaccine shortages by using a strategy inspired by the one our country used to address the AIDS crisis. Mr. Biden can marshal the federal government’s resources to manufacture additional vaccine supplies and combine that move with vigorous efforts to boost distribution.”

The success of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which President George W. Bush launched to get HIV treatment and services to African countries in need, is an example of what the United States can accomplish, wrote the AIDS activists.

They continued: “Mr. Biden can help address today’s urgent global health challenge by

establishing the President's Emergency Plan for Vaccine Access and Relief, or Pepvar, and rapidly building facilities to manufacture vaccines and their constituent components at scale. Manufacturing could be coordinated using a model similar to the one used by the Department of Energy's national laboratories, in which a government-owned facility is operated by a private organization experienced in the relevant sector."

For an interesting look at AIDS history and the role HIV advocacy played in pressuring the FDA to change its drug approval process, see "Thirty Years Later, AIDS Activists Who 'Seized Control' of the FDA Discuss Their Legacy." Participants in the talk include Kessler, Gonsalves, Staley and others.

For a collection of articles in POZ on the intersection of COVID-19 and HIV, click #COVID-19. And for more about the coronavirus, visit COVIDhealth.com.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.covidhealth.com/article/former-fda-leader-hiv-background-spearhead-covid19-efforts