How Will Joe Biden Tackle COVID-19?

The president-elect names a diverse roster of noted experts to his pandemic task force.

November 29, 2020 By Liz Highleyman

Updated November 29, 2020, to add newly appointed members of the Biden-Harris COVID-19 task force.

President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris have hit the ground running, releasing a plan to combat the nation's explosive COVID-19 epidemic.

"President-elect Biden believes that the federal government must act swiftly and aggressively to help protect and support our families, small businesses, first responders, and caregivers essential to help us face this challenge, those who are most vulnerable to health and economic impacts, and our broader communities -- not to blame others or bail out corporations," according to the plan, available at buildbackbetter.gov.

The Biden-Harris plan promises to listen to science, ensure that public health decisions are informed by experts and "promote trust, transparency, common purpose and accountability in our government."

Specific proposals include doubling the number of drive-through coronavirus test sites, establishing a U.S. Public Health Jobs Corps to undertake culturally competent contact tracing and using the Defense Production Act to ramp up production of personal protective equipment. Biden also indicated that would reverse Trump's withdrawal from the World Health Organization on his first day in office.

In a departure from the Trump administration's approach, the Biden-Harris team promises to provide clear and consistent guidance for how individuals and communities should navigate the pandemic.

"Social distancing is not a light switch, It is a dial," the plan states. "President-elect Biden will direct the CDC to provide specific evidence-based guidance for how to turn the dial up or down relative to the level of risk and degree of viral spread in a community, including when to open or close certain businesses, bars, restaurants, and other spaces; when to open or close schools, and what steps they need to take to make classrooms and facilities safe; appropriate restrictions on size of gatherings; [and] when to issue stay-at-home restrictions."

Biden also promises money to help schools and small businesses operate safely, as well as

increased funding for state and local governments.

Although Biden has called on every American to wear a mask when they are around people outside their household, and has asked governors and local officials to require mask use mandatory, he does not appear to have the authority to issue a national mask mandate or a nationwide lockdown.

COVID-19 Task Force

On November 9, the transition team announced the first members of its COVID-19 task force, which includes people with expertise in public health, epidemiology, medicine and public policy.

The task force is co-chaired by former Food and Drug Administration commissioner David Kessler, MD, now a professor at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF); Yale associate dean for health equity research Marcella Nunez-Smith, MD, MHS; and former surgeon general Vivek Murthy, MD.

Other notable names include former Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority director Rick Bright, PhD, who resigned after filing a whistleblower complaint about the Trump administration's COVID-19 response; former Obama administration health policy adviser Zeke Emanuel, MD, of the University of Pennsylvania; Atul Gawande, MD, PhD, a Harvard professor who was formerly CEO of Amazon's healthcare venture, Haven; former Ryan White Care Act director and U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator Eric Goosby, MD, now also at UCSF; former Chicago public health commissioner Julie Morita, MD, now at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; epidemiologists Michael Osterholm, MD, PhD, of the University of Minnesota; and Loyce Pace, MPH, executive director of the Global Health Council.

After complaints that the task force did not include front-line care providers, on November 28, the Biden-Harris team added Jane Hopkins, RNMH, a nurse specializing in mental health who is serves as executive vice president of SEIU Healthcare 1199NW, a health workers' union in Washington State. Other recent additions include Jill Jim, PhD, MPH, executive director at the Navajo Nation Department of Health, and David Michaels, PhD, a George Washington University epidemiologist who served as assistant secretary of labor for occupational safety and health during the Obama administration.

"As COVID-19 surges across the country, I need a team advising me and a transition that offers diverse perspectives and viewpoints," Biden said when he announced the new members. "Ms. Hopkins, Dr. Jim, and Dr. Michaels will strengthen the board's work and help ensure that our COVID-19 planning will address inequities in health outcomes and the workforce."

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