



Podcast transcript: Interview with APHA's Georges Benjamin on the 2025 public health outlook

January 2025 episode

SOPHIA MEADOR: This is the Nation's Health podcast. Thanks for joining us for the January 2025 episode. I'm your host. Sophia Meador.

The nation took to the polls last year, electing a new wave of leadership to Congress and the White House. With a single party that's often been unfriendly to public health now in firm control of federal policy and funding, public health supporters are wondering what this shift will mean.

In this episode, I'll talk with Georges Benjamin, executive director of American Public Health Association. We'll talk about what leadership changes could mean for the public health system, who could be impacted, and how the workforce can take action to defend the public's health.

MEADOR: Hi, Dr. Benjamin, thanks for joining us to get us started. What's your outlook for public health policy under new leadership?

DR. GEORGES BENJAMIN: They're all going to be a battle. We know that reproductive rights are a high priority for this administration to take away. We know that they are looking to cut Medicaid funding and cap the amount of dollars that are going into Medicaid. So there's going to be a major debate about making sure that everyone has access to adequate health insurance. Medicaid will be their first target.

We also know that there is an argument that Medicare is on the chopping block as well, because in order to get the kinds of savings that they're proposing, they're going to have to go to entitlements, which includes Medicare, Medicaid and some of the food programs.

MEADOR: what impact could the new leadership have on decisions for public health funding?

BENJAMIN: The House, in its last iteration of the budget bill, wanted to do dramatic cuts to public health. The backstop to prevent that from happening was the Democratic Senate, which was not going to go along with those cuts. We should be seeing fairly substantial cuts to public health.

And the challenge, of course, is they want these cuts because they want to do a bigger tax cut for more wealthy people. So we're going to have to do is we're going to have to do a better job of educating people in local communities, because at the end of the day, these cuts are actually going to hit people in local communities.

MEADOR: What communities will be most affected by those cuts?

BENJAMIN: So the people that are most vulnerable for these changes are the lower income communities, whether they're communities of color, whether they're white, low, blue collar workers in middle America, all those communities are at enormous risk.

Because we actually look at who actually utilizes these programs, they are people in the lower income levels, regardless of race and ethnicity, who live in middle America, who live in Appalachia, who live in our central cities. They are at the most risk, because they have the least capacity to make up those cuts.

MEADOR: What would those funding cuts mean for state and local public health departments?

BENJAMIN: You know, it's 70% of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's dollars go to state and local programs, mostly through our state and local health departments. Same thing with the Health Resources and Services Administration. They're going to see dramatic cuts. And of course, the challenge that that is, is that in order to place any of those programs, local governments are going to have to pick up slack, and so I think we're going to see a lot of pushback from local governments at some of those cuts.

MEADOR: The new leadership has not only talked about cutting funding to public health programs, but shrinking the size of critical agencies such as Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What would that mean for public health?

BENJAMIN: We know that the climate change program and the injury program at CDC are under threat, particularly the gun violence prevention programs, but we also know that there are programs that they just don't really understand, like some of the environmental programs. In addition to climate change, there is an effort to divide the CDC up into several different components.

And of course, if you ever been to a big reorganization, you know that once you start reorganizing, you become very dysfunctional during that period of the reorganization. And so that's part of the problem, is that they want to go through a massive reorganization at a time when we have significant health problems we have to address.

MEADOR: At state and local levels, Is there any opportunity to defend public health?

BENJAMIN: Good news is that on a recent survey, we discovered that every state has a reasonable advocacy effort. The secret now is, how do we activate those people? How do we make sure that they have the right knowledge, the tools to advocate for the public's health.

The challenge we have is we have a lot of new members of Congress, and they may or may not know how funding is acquired and what those programs support. There will be an opportunity for us to do a better job of educating these elected officials around the impact of funding that is currently on the table and impact of budget cuts in the future.

MEADOR: How can public health professionals advocate for and protect health?

BENJAMIN: You know, I always tell everybody to know who elected officials are, and don't be afraid. Get to know them and develop a relationship with them. Make yourself available as an expert when they have questions, because they don't know everything.

And then when we send out information, or if your state or local health department or Affiliate sends out information, use that information and share that with your elected officials and go in and have conversations about the program so that they have a better understanding of the needs in your community and how you can be helpful to them as they try to do their job.

MEADOR: Finally, Dr. Benjamin, how do you personally feel about the outlook of public health right now?

BENJAMIN: We know public health is being challenged, but I always think of public health outlook is really bright, even if they don't know they need us.

They need us, and they will always come calling because we're here to help them, and we're here to protect the public.

MEADOR: And with that, we thank Dr. Benjamin for his time and expertise for more [read our story](#) on the impacts of changing leadership in the January issue of The Nation's Health, which is online now.

Thank you for listening to The Nation's Health podcast.

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