



The Nation's Health Podcast transcript: *CDC attack signals lack of support for public health workforce*

August 2025 episode

BENJAMIN: Public health workers are heroes. They get up every day and they go to work. They often go to work in hazardous situations, and we should recognize the fact that they're always putting themselves behind everybody else.

SOPHIA MEADOR: *From the American Public Health Association, I'm Sophia Meador and this is The Nation's Health Podcast.*

The public health community is still reeling from this month's attack on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On Aug. 8, a gunman fired multiple rounds at CDC's campus, killing a local police officer and terrifying workers. In the aftermath, leaders are calling for better protection, respect and support for the nation's public health workforce.

They're also calling for end to misinformation that may have inspired the shooter — some of which has come from the nation's top health leaders. On Aug. 20, more than 750 current and former federal health workers issued a public declaration that called out HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. for his role in spreading inaccurate information and urged him to guarantee the safety of health workers.

To break down where the nation needs to go from here, I'm joined by two leaders from the public health field. First up is Susan Polan, associate executive director for public affairs and advocacy at the American Public Health Association.

MEADOR: So Susan, we know the attack was suspected to be fueled by vaccine distrust. What role do you see misinformation having in rising vaccine doubt?

POLAN: Misinformation has been a critical piece of a rising vaccine doubt. It started long before this event. It started long before this administration. But it has been this ongoing drum beat of information about the connection between autism and vaccines. There is none — the efficacy of the COVID vaccine, it was incredibly effective, and we know that millions of lives were saved.

But there have been a small number of pretty powerful and vocal players who have had an ongoing attack on the value and work on the value and usefulness of vaccines. And what happened at CDC was

kind of the tragic result of those years and years of mis- and disinformation that have been amplified and since the new administration and RFK came into place.

MEADOR: And what specific actions has Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. played in amplifying the vaccine distrust?

POLAN: He was one of the 'dirty dozen' that were very clearly throwing out mis- and disinformation for years. But since he has had this platform, he has been actively attacking vaccines, despite what he said during his confirmation hearings.

We see it in the words that he says. We see it in the actions that he takes — the removal of all of the well-qualified ACIP members to replace them with people who have clear conflicts of interest, the questioning of what's happening at FDA, the undermining of the vaccine process and the evaluation of vaccines. He has been on the front line of fueling this distrust.

MEADOR: And based on what you're hearing, how has this tragedy affected the public health workforce?

POLAN: I've heard both directly from public health workers and anecdotally...it is the culmination of years of overwork and underpay and verbal and personal attacks. This is the straw that broke the camel's back.

I think it's just this idea that they go to work every day. They are well-trained, well-intentioned people who have done nothing but creating healthy people and healthy communities. And this is just so demoralizing.

The comments that we have heard from the HHS have been milquetoast at best. The fact that the president has said nothing. All of this just fuels this feeling of no matter what we do — and we're doing good things, we're doing the right thing — it's not enough. And we are the scapegoat.

MEADOR: And how can our workforce cope right now?

POLAN: A lot of it is, unfortunately, not something that we can do as a country. It's a lot of it's going to be self care. Find your friends, find your people.

But what we can do as a community, is we can speak up and we can make clear public health is there. Public health is doing the work. You might not see us and that's when we're doing our work well. So just reminding people that that there is this network of, of people who are a hidden umbrella that are protecting you every day.

And part of that's the workforce's responsibility. Part of that is organizations like APHA's responsibility to redefine and make clear how important public health is to everybody's life.

MEADOR: And how has APHA responded to this tragedy?

POLAN: We're reminding people about the value of public health and what it does, but also that federal workers were attacked. Federal workers were attacked directly with a gun and that people need to understand that there is no place for that in our country. That federal workers are people who have given up probably much more lucrative opportunities to do good work — to wear the white hats.

We're continuing to talk about it, to raise the profile. And so we just need to continue to remind people that this is the — federal workers aren't the enemy.

MEADOR: And what needs to happen now to ensure the safety of our workforce?

POLAN: There's a lot of things. Part of it is this education that I'm talking about, but the truth is, we also have a gun problem that we need to deal with. Nobody needs five guns that can shoot 500 bullets at a federal building. So that that's a piece of the work that we need to do.

But it's it is the education process and the continuing of the reminders that public health and the federal workforce, more generally, is doing things not to harm the public, not, not waste, fraud and abuse. It is doing hard work with little resources to do the right thing. And that's what APHA can and will continue to do.

This tragedy has broader implications for the public health workforce and its ability to do its job effectively. Undermining trust in public health doesn't just affect individuals — it threatens the stability of the entire public health system.

Joining me now to discuss this is Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.

MEADOR: Dr. Benjamin, we just witnessed a very direct violent attack directed at public health workers. What ramifications does that have on our workforce?

BENJAMIN: You know, public health workers have one goal: to help people. Their sole purpose is to keep us safe and healthy. And so when they can't do their job because they're afraid, it prohibits them from doing their job. They're always looking around the corner and looking to see if they're going to be safe or not. You cannot do your job.

MEADOR: How do you think political attacks affects the public health infrastructure?

BENJAMIN: The political attacks create distrust and public health works by getting people to trust what we do, because we generally don't control anything that they do. We give recommendations. So if people aren't going to follow what you do, what you recommend, then you're not going to be healthy.

MEADOR: And what impact does that have on the public's health?

BENJAMIN: When you don't have trusted people that you want to follow, then people don't do things such as getting screening for cancer, they don't eat more healthy, they don't exercise more and at the end of the day, that results in more, more morbidity and more mortality.

And so it has a dramatic impact on the health of the community, both individually and from a population perspective.

MEADOR: And what did you make of RFK Jr.'s response to this attack?

BENJAMIN: The secretary's response was inadequate. He did not show the empathy that's essential for a person at the level in which he is.

He also then undermined his own message, even though he said no one should be subject to violence, he then questioned the authority and capability of the CDC.

MEADOR: And APHA has previously called for Kennedy to resign or be fired. Where does that call stand now?

BENJAMIN: We still believe that Mr. Kennedy should have never gotten a job in the first place and that he's demonstrated his incompetence through his actions throughout the six months or so that he's been there.

MEADOR: And where do we go from here? And what next steps do we need to take to ensure the safety of the workforce?

BENJAMIN: It's going to be very important that we first recognize that we have a zero tolerance to violence. That's particularly important in the workplace.

Even when we've had wars, there have been pauses to protect public health workers so they can care for the sick or injured. And we need to return to that area of normality in which public health workers are considered off limits for any kind of violence.

Public health workers are heroes. They get up every day and they go to work. They often go to work in hazardous situations, and we should recognize the fact that they're always putting themselves behind everybody else.

Thanks to our guests for speaking with us today. For more, visit the Public Health Under Threat page at [APHA.org](https://www.apha.org).