Biden Formally Announces Health Care Appointees, Public Health Priorities

Potential heads of HHS, CDC, COVID-19 task force aim to fight coronavirus in first 100 days.

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President-elect Joe Biden formally announced top members of his administration’s health care team — the first step in a sign of who might take the reins on the COVID-19 pandemic and the future of American health care in the coming years.
Among those Biden chose are California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, to be Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, and Massachusetts General Hospital Chief of Infectious Diseases Dr. Rochelle Walensky, to be director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Biden also announced health officials who he will task to lead efforts specifically against COVID-19. These include former Obama administration official Jeff Zients for COVID-19 response coordinator and Marcella Nunez-Smith as the chair of Biden’s new COVID-19 equity task force. Zients has been a part of the Biden transition, and Nunez-Smith co-chairs the transition’s COVID-19 advisory board.

The president-elect noted that he will also keep National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Disease Director Dr. Anthony Fauci on his COVID-19 response team. The two have been collaborating amid the transition, Biden added, to task the new team of health care leaders with three goals in mind for the first 100 days of the incoming administration, which are to:

- Form a universal masking plan that calls on federal spaces and mass transit to require mask-wearing, as well as working with state and local officials to encourage universal masking
- Deliver at least 100 million vaccinations to the American people within the first 100 days
- Make it a national priority to bring children back to in-person schooling

“They’ll lead the COVID-19 response across the government to accelerate testing, fix our supply chain and distribute the vaccine,” Biden said of his picks in his announcement. “They’ll work on my economic team because controlling the pandemic, delivering building health care and reviving the economy go hand in hand. They’ll work with my foreign policy and national security team because we can’t only beat the virus here at home. It must be beaten everywhere, or it will come back to haunt us again.”

This whole-of-government approach will also be helmed by other officials Biden has picked to lead. Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, also a co-chair of Biden’s COVID-19 task force, will return to his position, and national security expert Natalie Quillian will also co-direct the COVID-19 task force in the Biden administration.
The president-elect further said that he looks to his new CDC pick due to her experience tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic and to restore American trust in public health, signaling that stronger messaging is a key component to his COVID-19 approach.

“She’s uniquely qualified to restore morale and public trust,” Biden said. “She’ll marshal our finest scientists and public health experts in the CDC to turn the tide on this urgent crisis we’re facing today.”

Biden’s choice in Nunez-Smith also signals his emphasis on outreach to and desire to build trust with minority and underserved communities.

“It is not a coincidence, and it is not a matter of genetics, that more than 70% of African Americans and more than 60% of Latinx Americans personally know someone who has been hospitalized or has died of COVID-19,” Nunez-Smith said. “The same disparities ingrained in our economy, our housing system, our food system, our justice system and so many areas of our society, have conspired in this moment to create a grief gap that we cannot ignore. It is our societal obligation to ensure equitable access to testing, treatments and vaccines.”

The president-elect’s choice of Zients not only marks a return to serve for the former Obama advisor, but also the offering of technical talent and experience working in emergencies. Zients, for instance, led the recovery of the Healthcare.gov website after it crashed upon its 2013 launch.

Beyond the pandemic, Biden signaled that he looks to Becerra to strengthen the Affordable Care Act by expanding coverage and taking steps to lower prescription and drug costs. Becerra has led recent legal actions to protect the Obama-era law amid challenges to dismantle it.

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