Amid Ebola, Hantavirus Outbreaks, Democrats Decry Trump's Health Cuts

Infectious disease specialists have called on the White House to reverse cuts and rejoin the World Health Organization.

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The Trump administration's deep cuts to federal health agencies have become a political liability after a deadly outbreak of hantavirus aboard a cruise ship and the spread of an even more fearsome disease, Ebola, in Africa.

At least that's the way many Democrats see it.

They have seized on the situation to charge that the U.S. is ill prepared to respond to outbreaks — let alone a pandemic — after President Donald Trump slashed jobs and funding for public health infrastructure and pandemic preparedness. Infectious disease specialists have called on the White House to reverse cuts and rejoin the World Health Organization.

The White House, meanwhile, is on the defensive, trying to reassure a pandemic-weary public that the federal government can still mount effective responses to infectious disease outbreaks.

The FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention underwent massive layoffs as part of an effort led by billionaire businessman Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, that also resulted in the cancellation of billions of dollars in federal contracts and grants.

"These outbreaks are unfolding at a time when the U.S. public health infrastructure is under significant strain," said Leana Wen, an emergency medicine physician and former Baltimore health commissioner. "The CDC currently lacks a director, the FDA lacks a director, there is no surgeon general, and many leaders with outbreak response management experience have left the federal government."

The U.S. government has ordered quarantines and is monitoring potential exposures to hantavirus after an outbreak on a cruise ship. It is also implementing new restrictions for foreign travelers amid an Ebola outbreak in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo that has grown to more than 1,000 suspected cases. While neither situation is seen as likely to become a global pandemic, Democrats and infectious disease leaders have seized on the outbreaks to criticize the effects of the DOGE cuts and other administration public health policies.

The hantavirus cluster occurred on the MV Hondius, an expedition ship that left Argentina on April 1 for a monthlong sojourn with almost 150 people aboard. The earliest cases, including two deaths, were reported to the WHO on May 2. Three of 11 infected passengers have died. Hantavirus is typically spread to people from rodents, but this version, known as the Andes virus, can be passed person to person.

The Ebola outbreak has captured public attention, though no cases have been confirmed in the U.S. The virus — a rare strain called Bundibugyo, against which there are no proven vaccines or treatments — spread undetected for weeks, prompting WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to say he's concerned about the "scale and speed" of the outbreak. Seven Americans, including a doctor exposed to the virus, were evacuated to Germany by the U.S. State Department.

Democrats Criticize Cuts

Some Democrats are pressing the administration to rejoin the WHO and restore funding to federal agencies. A lawsuit is ongoing over the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the primary agency for providing foreign assistance. Core USAID activities included efforts to build local outbreak detection and prevention capacity in vulnerable regions, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) noted the emerging threats associated with the rising Ebola case count, posting May 27 on X: "We know how to stop outbreaks like this. But Trump chose not to stop it. He destroyed our global health team, deliberately exposing us."

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) said May 21 on X that the Trump administration's "sweeping and self destructive foreign aid cuts" left the U.S. and Congo struggling to contain the Ebola outbreak.

"An utterly predictable result from the chaos of DOGE," he said.

And, in the wake of the hantavirus outbreak, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York called on the administration to rehire fired outbreak-response workers, restore funding at the CDC and Department of Health and Human Services, and rejoin the WHO's global outbreak warning network.

"The Trump administration's gutting of America's public health preparedness has made the recent hantavirus outbreak even more alarming," Schumer said May 12 on the Senate floor.

Federal agencies pushed back on criticisms about the early response to hantavirus, with officials insisting on social media, at press events, and in TV appearances that their work was appropriate and effective.

The federal government is conducting a coordinated, interagency response, HHS spokesperson Emily Hilliard said. Claims that federal cuts have imperiled the response or future pandemic preparedness are "completely inaccurate," she said.

The CDC and State Department say they are ensuring rapid viral testing is available for the Ebola outbreak and are actively deploying resources through State Department country offices in Congo and Uganda.

“I want to assure you that CDC and our federal partners are working around the clock to ensure our information is accurate and that action plans are being implemented immediately,” Satish Pillai, who is leading the CDC’s Ebola response, said in a May 19 press call.

Trouble Spots

The criticism isn’t coming just from Democrats. Public health officials also say that Trump administration actions have hampered the response to both outbreaks and that the cuts to USAID helped set the stage for the spread of Ebola.

The International Rescue Committee, which helps people affected by humanitarian crises, has said funding cuts by the administration in March 2025 prompted a reduction in disease surveillance systems in the epicenter of the Ebola outbreak.

The U.S. had funded the surveillance, as well as outbreak preparedness efforts to prevent infections, with hand-washing stations, showers, latrines, and waste management. The committee said it had to cut programming.

“Years of underinvestment and recent funding cuts have left many health facilities without adequate protective equipment, surveillance capacity, or frontline support needed to respond quickly and safely,” Heather Reoch Kerr, the committee’s country director in Congo, said in a statement.

The federal government’s overall response to the outbreak, including the decision not to fly Americans exposed to Ebola to the U.S. for treatment, stands in sharp contrast with previous responses to Ebola, some epidemiologists and former health officials say. It also could discourage other medical professionals from traveling to the region to help.

During the 2014-2015 outbreak in West Africa, the federal government eventually deployed Army and Navy technicians and other service members to process blood tests, build medical labs, and train local healthcare workers.

USAID emergency response teams also played a key role in the on-the-ground response to that Ebola outbreak, from building treatment rooms to handling burial of the dead, Ron Klain, Ebola czar during the Obama administration, said on NPR.

Michael Osterholm, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, said USAID was “a key support for programs.”

“The infrastructure in Africa has been cut with the cuts at USAID,” he said. “It’s making it more difficult.”

The United States' ability to respond to a real pandemic is "a mess" because of the cuts and the administration's stance on mRNA vaccines, the technology behind covid shots, Osterholm said. The White House last year canceled nearly $500 million in contracts for mRNA vaccine development despite a lack of evidence of any health risks.

The rapid technology would enable faster worldwide vaccine production in the case of a pandemic compared with more traditional vaccine development, Osterholm said.

Some health leaders have also leveled criticism over the U.S. response to hantavirus. For example, the CDC on May 8 issued a health advisory about the cluster of hantavirus cases on the cruise ship in the Atlantic, but the alert came after some passengers had already arrived in the U.S. in late April on commercial flights.

And the agency's first news conference on the outbreak aboard the MV Hondius took place May 9. The phone briefing with reporters came five days after the WHO had alerted the public about the situation.

"The first press conference was after this was international news," said Wen, the former Baltimore health official.

The CDC has defended its response to hantavirus. It has required U.S. passengers of the cruise ship to remain in a quarantine facility and has assured the public that the overall health risk here at home is low.

"The country is prepared. The CDC is focused on it," Mehmet Oz, a physician and head of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, told reporters at the White House on May 11.

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