

# Inside a crisis at the CDC: Shooting adds to trauma as workers describe projects, careers in limbo

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Supporters of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention rally at a park in Atlanta on Sunday, days after a gunman fired shots into CDC buildings. (Rebecca Grapevine / Healthbeat)

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention workers whose jobs have been reinstated after dizzying Trump administration disruptions say they remain stuck in a budgetary, political, and professional limbo.

Their work includes major agency priorities such as HIV testing and

monitoring, as well as work at the nation's leading sexually transmitted infections lab. And while employees are back, many projects have been canceled or stalled, as funding disappears or is delayed.

"For a while, work was staring at a blank screen," an HIV scientist said. "I had a couple of projects before this. I'm trying to get them restarted."

"We don't know what's happening or what to do," said an HIV prevention researcher who was fired then rehired.

These employees voiced deep concern over the future of the agency and its work on HIV and other threats. The unprecedented downsizing could lead to loss of life and higher spending on medical care, they say. Their uncertain employment status has sunk morale. Many worry about the future of public health.

On Friday, a gunman identified by Georgia authorities as Patrick Joseph White fired shots at CDC buildings in Atlanta. A first responder on the scene, DeKalb County police officer David Rose, was killed. White, who was found dead, was possibly motivated by his views on vaccines, according to [news reports](#).

The attack added another level of anxiety for agency workers.

"We feel threatened from inside, and, obviously, now from outside," a lab scientist said Sunday. "The trauma runs so differently in all of us. And is this the last straw for some of us? The overall morale — would you go back in the building and you could be shot at?"

Healthbeat interviewed 11 CDC workers, who offered a rare glimpse into conditions at the agency. All but one had been fired then offered their jobs back. Most have worked on HIV-related projects for at least several years. All spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing a fear of retaliation.

They fear their employment, in the HIV scientist's terms, "is on shaky

ground.”

“I’m concerned there is chaos and that we lost ground on HIV prevention” from reductions in data collection and layoffs of local public health workers, an HIV epidemiologist said. “I feel like a pawn on a chessboard.”

HHS spokesperson Emily Hilliard responded to a query with this statement:

“Under Secretary Kennedy’s leadership, the nation’s critical public health functions remain intact and effective. The Trump administration is committed to protecting essential services — whether it’s supporting coal miners and firefighters through NIOSH, safeguarding public health through lead prevention, or researching and tracking the most prevalent communicable diseases. HHS is streamlining operations without compromising mission-critical work. Enhancing the health and well-being of all Americans remains our top priority.”

## **CDC’s programs on HIV face uncertainty**

The workers received some positive news July 31, when a Senate committee voted to keep CDC funding at more than \$9 billion, near its current level. “It is very encouraging, but that’s only one step in the appropriations process,” the HIV researcher said.

Still, under the Trump administration’s budget request, the CDC’s programs on HIV face uncertainty. Dr. John Brooks, who retired as chief medical officer of the CDC’s Division of HIV Prevention last year, expressed concern over the Ending the HIV Epidemic initiative. Launched in President Donald Trump’s first term, it “breathed new life into HIV prevention,” Brooks said.

The successes of the Ending the HIV Epidemic initiative are jeopardized by the administration plan to scale back HIV prevention efforts, Brooks said. That would include the potential elimination of the CDC Division of HIV Prevention, which provides funds to state health departments and other

groups for testing and prevention, conducts HIV monitoring and surveillance, researches HIV prevention and care, and assists medical professionals with training and education.

“There is no way to achieve the goals of EHE without maintaining the national prevention infrastructure it depends on,” Brooks said. “There is every reason to worry that in fact new HIV infections will rise again.”

Under Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the Department of Health and Human Services carried out widespread layoffs at the CDC and other health agencies beginning in early April. Lawsuits over those mass firings are playing out in federal courts.

The administration’s budget blueprint would move CDC HIV work — with many fewer employees, according to people Healthbeat interviewed — to the Administration for a Healthy America, a new HHS division Kennedy has championed.

The Medical Monitoring Project, which tracks outcomes, quality, and gaps in HIV treatment, is set to [be a casualty](#) under the Trump restructuring plan, an HIV prevention physician said.

HHS officials have not communicated with the rank and file about the restructuring, several CDC workers said.

“It’s been crickets,” the HIV scientist said.

The White House’s proposed CDC budget for the next fiscal year contains a cut of more than 50%, plummeting from \$9.2 billion in fiscal year 2025 to about \$4.2 billion, according to administration documents and public health advocacy groups, with some agency functions transferred to the proposed AHA. The Senate committee, by an overwhelming vote, injected billions back into the agency budget and declined to fund the AHA.

U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff, a Georgia Democrat, thanked the committee for

“rejecting the unacceptable effort to defund most of the CDC.”

“The budget request from the White House included a 56% cut to the world’s preeminent epidemiological agency,” Ossoff said. He also criticized a “systematic destruction of morale at the CDC, the disbandment of entire agencies focused on maternal health and neonatal health and disease prevention at the CDC.”

## **How the cuts would trickle down to states**

If the White House prevails and the prevention program is eliminated, “we would see most states have no funding for HIV prevention,” said Emily Schreiber, senior director of policy and legislative affairs for the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors. “That means most states would not be able to conduct any HIV testing, any referral to care, and/or referral to preventive services like PrEP,” or pre-exposure prophylaxis, a drug that [can prevent HIV infections](#).

“It means that states would not be able to help people get access to medications,” she said, “and that means that we would see new cases and an increased spread of HIV across the United States.”

“We would definitely see layoffs at the CDC, and I think we’d probably see them at state health departments and community-based organizations as well,” she added.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health has recently laid off or reassigned dozens of HIV workers due to funding problems, according to a statement emailed to Healthbeat.

“I fear all HIV prevention work will go away permanently,” the HIV prevention researcher said. “I don’t think this administration wants HIV prevention work to be done by the federal government.”

## 'A lot of the enthusiasm is gone'

Georgia leads U.S. states in the rate of new HIV infections, according to the latest data from [AIDSVu](#). CDC workers also said they're concerned that vulnerable communities of color and LGBTQ+ communities would be deeply harmed by funding cuts.

In Georgia and other states, information provided by the Medical Monitoring Project about access to care will disappear, the HIV physician said.

Information on prevention and treatment will dwindle for people who are disadvantaged, he said, including those with substance abuse problems or mental illness, transgender people, and those living in poverty.

"There is a lot of anger and sadness among people over the termination of the project," the physician said. "A lot of the enthusiasm is gone."

An effective home testing program for HIV plans to shutter this fall, said Patrick Sullivan, the [Together TakeMeHome](#) project's lead scientist and a professor at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health. In its notice canceling funding for the project, the CDC said it no longer had the staff to oversee it. Based at Emory, the project delivered more than 900,000 free home testing kits to people across the country through an easy-to-use website and integration with dating apps.

More than 100 HIV workers were among the more than 450 CDC staffers brought back, said employees interviewed by Healthbeat. Some cited [media coverage](#), support in Congress, and advocacy by patient groups and pharmaceutical companies for their reinstatement. "Members of Congress are going to bat for HIV," the epidemiologist said.

Several are closely watching a lawsuit brought by 20 Democratic attorneys general, seeking to halt an agency restructuring plan Kennedy [announced in March](#). They are also paying attention to a lawsuit filed in California that challenges the firings.

A few people whose jobs were restored have retired or moved on to other work. "Some people aren't trusting we will remain, so they're leaving," the HIV prevention researcher said.

At the CDC's sexually transmitted infections lab in Atlanta, work has also slowed due to a shrinking staff and new spending constraints on supplies, the lab scientist said.

Restored lab workers are focusing on high-priority areas such as syphilis and gonorrhea while other diseases have been back-burnered, the scientist said, adding "a lot of what we were doing was staying ahead of the next pathogen, and we feel like our time and effort to do that now is limited."

"We're all public health because we know what the mission is," the scientist said. "We just want to get our job done and protect the American public."

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