



December 2020

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT Biden's Pandemic Plan

### PRO POINTS

- **President-elect Joe Biden will take office amid the worst coronavirus surge yet.** More than 1 million Americans are infected each week and more than 2,000 die every day.
- **Biden plans to focus on distributing the just-authorized vaccine, while beefing up contact tracing and encouraging masks.** He's looking to Congress for a massive Covid relief bill that could help pay for his priorities while staving off economic collapse and rescuing state budgets.
- **The Biden administration will coordinate the pandemic response across the federal government, in contrast to President Donald Trump's mixed messaging and strategy of counting on states to take the lead.**
- **The teams include dozens of officials to oversee every facet of the response plan and keep Biden and his closest advisers in the loop.** His teams have some recognizable names from the Obama years, including those who worked on H1N1 and the Ebola epidemic.

### HOW WE GOT HERE

The Thanksgiving surge that public health officials feared is now a reality. While millions of people are expected to receive their first Covid-19 vaccine in the coming weeks, the country isn't likely to reach herd immunity for several more months. Simple public health measures such as masks could reduce the number of deaths during that time, but the politics around the virus and its response make that unlikely. Instead, a pandemic-weary public will likely travel for Christmas, and those indoor gatherings across the country could spark a fresh wave of infections.

The Trump administration's response to the pandemic has been to bet big on vaccines while the president and top aides flouted public health guidance, a strategy that most public health experts call an unmitigated disaster.

Congress has left states critically short on funding — money governors from both parties say they need to mount a robust vaccination campaign. Even if Congress sends more aid to states before it heads home for the year, public health officials across the country will be playing catch-up to hire people to administer the shots, employ public messaging and coordinate mass vaccination sites.

### Top priorities

President-elect Joe Biden promised to "change the course" of the pandemic during his first 100 days in office. To do that, he is hoping to rally the country behind three key strategies: vaccines, masks and contact tracing.

#### Vaccines

Biden has pledged to administer 100 million shots of a coronavirus vaccine within his first 100 days in office, a pledge aligning with the doses the federal government has already secured. Yet the quest to vaccinate America is complex, involving detailed prioritization schemes of who gets the vaccine first, ultra-cold storage for Pfizer's shot and the need to convince a hesitant public to get the shots.

#### Masks

Biden is asking Americans to wear masks for the first 100 days of his term. It's his explicit attempt to reframe face coverings, which have become a political symbol. Biden has framed the request as a patriotic call to duty, saying it won't end the pandemic but that it is an easy first step that the country can take together. Biden also intends to sign an executive order mandating masks in federal buildings, as well as on planes, trains and buses that travel across state lines.

#### Contact tracing

Biden has called for the creation of a federal corps of at least 100,000 public health workers to assist states with contact tracing — a program that would require congressional funding. Currently, state and local health departments are so overwhelmed with cases that the CDC has put out guidance on who to prioritize when they can't call everyone who tests positive.



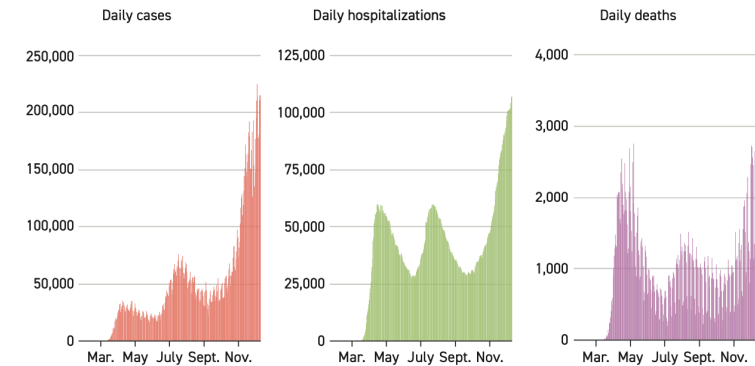
## WHAT'S NEXT

**Vaccines:** Biden will oversee the largest mass vaccination effort in U.S. history. Although the Trump administration has already set distribution in motion, the complex task of combating vaccine hesitancy, reaching underserved communities and immunizing rural areas will largely come under the Biden administration.

The first shots went into arms in mid-December after Pfizer secured FDA's authorization for emergency use. Federal health officials project the second Covid-19 vaccine, from Moderna, could soon be authorized, and two more vaccine developers could ask for the FDA's green light by February.

## On Dec. 11, numbers topped nearly 235,000 new cases and 3,000 new deaths

Joe Biden will take the reins of government as coronavirus surges across the nation. While vaccinations have begun, it will take months to inoculate enough people to achieve herd immunity and contain the virus. Covid-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths show no signs of slowing down.



Source: The COVID-19 Tracking Project

Biden's team is also working on a messaging plan to sell the vaccine to a wary public. According to a transition official, the Biden team is "planning on how to communicate in the most creative, transparent and effective ways to reach Americans where they are."

**Contact tracing:** Biden has pledged to bolster contact tracing work by creating a federal public health corps of at least 100,000 workers to assist in tracking the spread of the disease. The plan also seeks to combat widespread mistrust of the practice by hiring members of minority and underserved populations to do "culturally competent" outreach in their own communities. Public health leaders are calling on the corps to be made permanent and deployed to work on other infectious diseases once the pandemic is over.

Yet the proposal, which is projected to cost \$3.6 billion, would require approval from a deeply divided Congress. And if Republicans win at least one of the two Senate runoff elections in Georgia in January and clinch control of the chamber, the contact-tracing plan would face even dimmer chances.

**Masks:** Biden is asking Americans to wear masks for the first 100 days of his term, a move he is framing as a civic duty and an "easy start" to slowing the spread of the virus while vaccines are rolling out across the country. "It's the easiest thing you can do to reduce Covid cases, hospitalizations, and death," Biden said in December. "It's not a political statement. It's a patriotic act."

But he can't do much more than appeal to people's common sense and ask the 12 remaining states that don't already have a mask mandate to consider imposing one. But Biden does have control over what goes on inside federal buildings and much of the nation's travel. The president-elect plans to issue an order mandating masks on planes as well as on buses and trains crossing state lines, and in federal buildings.



# Biden's Covid-19 teams

With the pandemic response set to consume much of his first term in office, Biden is setting up a sprawling infrastructure that will cut across the federal government and collaborate on everything from vaccine distribution to public messaging. The teams include familiar faces, including many people who worked for the Obama administration and many who advised Biden on Covid-19 during the campaign.

## Cabinet and sub-cabinet members

Some of Biden's picks to take the lead health policy in his new administration will have to be confirmed by the Senate, while some can immediately serve out of his White House. Xavier Becerra served for almost 25 years in the House, where he was deeply involved in drafting the Affordable Care Act, before becoming California's attorney general in 2017. His many lawsuits challenging the Trump administration's health policies drew the attention of the Biden team, and he was tapped to run the Department of Health and Human Services in December. Transition co-chair Jeff Zients is set to serve as Biden's Covid-19 coordinator. Zients has previously served as the director of the National Economic Council and the acting director of the Office of Management and Budget, but he may be best known for his work salvaging Healthcare.gov in 2013.

### Key players

- Xavier Becerra, HHS secretary
- Vivek Murthy, surgeon general\*
- Marcella Nunez-Smith, Covid-19 Equity Task Force Chair\*
- Rochelle Walensky, Director of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Jeff Zients, Covid-19 coordinator
- Natalie Quillian, deputy Covid-19 coordinator

## Pandemic advisory board

Biden set up this task force to advise him during the transition on how to tackle the pandemic once he's in office. It pulls together people with frontline health care experience, infectious disease experts, academics, health care advocates and former government officials. Murthy, who served as surgeon general during the Obama administration, will return to that role next year — with enhanced responsibilities. A close Biden ally, he's been briefing the president-elect on the pandemic since March and co-chaired the transition's pandemic advisory board. He is one of the leading experts shaping Biden's plans to tackle Covid-19.

### Key players

- David Kessler, former FDA commissioner
- Murthy, surgeon general\*
- Nunez-Smith, Covid-19 Equity Task Force Chair\*
- Ezekiel Emanuel, professor at University of Pennsylvania
- Julie Morita, executive VP of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Rick Bright, former director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority

## Interagency landing team

In addition to the so-called Agency Review Teams that incoming presidents send to work with different departments in every transition, Biden has also set up a group of more than 50 people who will work across the different agencies on the pandemic response, with three sub-teams divided up into areas of focus.

### Key Players

#### DOMESTIC TEAM LEADER

- Sarah Bianchi, top economic and domestic policy aide to Biden when he was vice president

#### NATIONAL SECURITY/FOREIGN POLICY TEAM LEADERS

- Rebecca Katz, director of Georgetown's Center for Global Health Science and Security
- Dylan George, former biological threats specialist in the Obama administration

#### TECH STRATEGY DELIVERY LEADERS

- Mina Hsiang, of the health care firm Devoted Health
- Amy Pitelka, former lead counsel for the U.S. Digital Service

\*Individuals overlap between two groups