

Trump turns to critic of COVID mandates to run NIH

by Rob Stein | NPR | HEALTH NEWS

(HEALTH) - President-elect Donald Trump is tapping Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, a Stanford University health researcher, to be the next director of the National Institutes of Health.

Bhattacharya, a physician and health economist whose nomination requires Senate confirmation, would take charge of an agency that employs more than 18,000 workers and funds nearly \$48 billion in scientific research through nearly 50,000 grants to more than 300,000 researchers at more than 2,500 universities, medical schools and other institutions.

If confirmed, Bhattacharya could dramatically affect the future of medical science. The NIH is the world's largest public funder of biomedical research. But the NIH could be among the top targets for restructuring as the next administration tries to overhaul the federal government.

While the NIH has historically enjoyed bipartisan support, Trump proposed cutting the agency's budget during his first term. The NIH came under heavy criticism from some Republicans during the pandemic. That animosity has continued, especially towards some former long-serving NIH officials like Dr. Anthony Fauci, who led the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for 38 years, and Dr. Francis Collins, NIH director from 2009 to 2021.

One factor was an open letter called "The Great Barrington Declaration," which was released in October 2020 and challenged policies such as lockdowns and mask mandates.

Bhattacharya was one of three authors of the document. The declaration called for speeding herd immunity by allowing people at low risk to get infected while protecting those most vulnerable, like the elderly.

It was denounced by many public health experts as unscientific and irresponsible. "This is a fringe component of epidemiology," Collins told The Washington Post shortly after the document was released. "This is not mainstream science. It's dangerous. It fits into the political views of certain parts



Dr. Jay Bhattacharya speaks during a roundtable discussion with members of the House Freedom Caucus on the COVID-19 pandemic at The Heritage Foundation in late 2022. Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call/Getty Images

of our confused political establishment."

"They were wrong," says Dr. Gregory Poland, president of the Atria Academy of Science & Medicine, a nonprofit group based in New York. "So it is concerning," Poland says of Bhattacharya's selection.

"I don't think that Jay Bhattacharya belongs anywhere near the NIH, much less in the director's office," says Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. "That would be absolutely disastrous for the health and well-being of the American public and actually the world."

The next Trump administration may also crack down on funding research that became especially politically charged during the pandemic – known as "gain-of-function" research. That field studies how pathogens become more dangerous. The NIH also funds other hot button experiments that involve studying human embryonic stem cells and fetal tissue.

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City Enhances Cold Weather Shelter Operations for Winter Season

COLD WEATHER SHELTER ACTIVATION

(AUSTIN, TX) - The City of Austin's Homeless Strategy Office (HSO), in partnership with the Austin Area Urban League (AAUL), is committed to providing safe, reliable shelter for individuals and families experiencing homelessness during extreme cold weather. In response to feedback from community stakeholders, the City is implementing several key changes to the Cold Weather Shelter operations this winter to better serve the community. These improvements aim to enhance accessibility, support, and overall effectiveness in meeting the needs of vulnerable individuals.

"This year's enhancements to our cold weather shelter operations reflect our unwavering commitment to protecting the most vulnerable members of our community from life-threatening weather conditions," said David Gray, Homeless Strategy Officer. "These improvements ensure that, during the harshest winter months, we can provide safe, warm, and dignified accommodations for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. From higher temperature thresholds to family hotel vouchers, we are making it easier than ever for people to get the help they need during very cold nights. These improvements are a vital part of Austin's ongoing efforts to enhance services and provide better support for those experiencing homelessness."

Simplified Activation Thresholds
HSO is simplifying and raising the Cold Weather Shelter activation threshold. Shelters will now open when forecasted overnight temperatures at Camp Mabry are expected to reach 35 degrees or below. This new, simplified threshold replaces the previous multi-tiered criteria, which required temperatures to be 32 degrees or colder, 35 degrees with rain, or 35 degrees with wind chill. The updated approach will allow for more frequent and predictable shelter availability during cold weather cycles.

Earlier Notification of Activations
In response to community input, HSO will now activate Cold Weather Shelters up to one day in advance. This offers more time for the City, stakeholders, and service providers to inform the community about cold weather shelters. A decision to open shelters is final and will not be canceled, even if weather forecasts improve above the threshold.

After-Hours Embarkation Service
Recognizing that not all individuals seeking shelter can arrive at the central embarkation point (One Texas Center, 505 Barton Springs Rd.) during normal registration hours (6 p.m. to 8 p.m.), HSO and AAUL will introduce an After-Hours Embarkation Service. This service will provide transportation to shelters from the central embarkation point after the normal embarkation period. This extended access ensures that no one is turned away due to timing, providing greater flexibility for those in need of cold weather shelter.

Enhanced Meal Service
To ensure clients are well-nourished during their stay, HSO and AAUL have enhanced meal offerings at Cold Weather Shelters. In addition to providing hot dinners each evening, breakfast or snacks will be available the following morning. Efforts will be made to accommodate dietary preferences and restrictions to ensure the meals meet the diverse needs of shelter residents.

Support for Families with Children
Families with children, as well as unaccompanied minors, seeking refuge during Cold Weather Shelter activation periods will be provided with hotel vouchers. These vouchers will ensure families have access to safe, comfortable accommodations during shelter activation. The vouchers will cover the cost of lodging for a designated period, with extensions available as needed based on availability.

The City of Austin and AAUL advises all individuals experiencing homelessness to take advantage of these resources during the cold weather months. While Cold Weather Shelters are primarily accessed by people experiencing homelessness, they are available to anyone needing a warm place to spend the night. The City of Austin encourages the community to share this information widely to help those in need access these critical services. Individuals can get information about access and activation by calling the Cold Weather Shelter Hotline - 512-972-5055.

Please follow austintexas.gov/alerts for emergency information updated in multiple languages. To learn more about homelessness in Austin, please visit www.austintexas.gov/homelessness.