

## Coronavirus

## Vilified, burnout

## US health officials quit or get sacked

PROVIDENCE, R.I., Aug 11, (AP): Vilified, threatened with violence and in some cases suffering from burnout, dozens of state and local public health leaders around the US have resigned or have been fired amid the coronavirus outbreak, a testament to how politically combustible masks, lockdowns and infection data have become.

One of the latest departures came Sunday, when California's public health director, **Dr Sonia Angell**, was ousted following a technical glitch that caused a delay in reporting hundreds of thousands of virus test results - information used to make decisions about reopening businesses and schools.



Angell

Last week, New York City's health commissioner was replaced after months of friction with the Police Department and City Hall.

A review by the Kaiser Health News service and The Associated Press finds at least 49 state and local public health leaders have resigned, retired or been fired since April across 23 states. The list has grown by more than 20 people since the AP and KHN started keeping track in June.

Dr Tom Frieden, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, called the numbers stunning. He said they reflect burnout, as well as attacks on public health experts and institutions from the highest levels of government, including from President Donald Trump, who has sidelined the CDC during the pandemic.

"The overall tone toward public health in the US is so hostile that it has kind of emboldened people to make these attacks," Frieden said.

The cuts come at a time when public health expertise is needed more than ever, said Lori Tremmel Freeman, CEO of the National Association of County and City Health Officials.

"We're moving at breakneck speed here to stop a pandemic, and you can't afford to hit the pause button and say, 'We're going to change the leadership around here and we'll get back to you after we hire somebody,'" Freeman said.

## Confirmed

As of Monday, confirmed infections in the United States stood at over 5 million, with deaths topping 163,000, the highest in the world, according to the count kept by Johns Hopkins University.

Many of the firings and resignations have to do with conflicts over mask orders or social distancing shutdowns, Freeman said. Despite the scientific evidence, many politicians and others have argued that such measures are not needed, no matter what health experts tell them.

"It's not a health divide; it's a political divide," Freeman said.

Some health officials said they were stepping down for family reasons, and some left for jobs at other agencies, such as the CDC. Some, like Angell, were ousted because of what higher-ups said was poor leadership or a failure to do their job.

Others have complained that they were overworked, underpaid, unappreciated or thrust into a pressure-cooker environment.

"To me, a lot of the divisiveness and the stress and the resignations that are happening right and left are the consequence of the lack of a real national response plan," said Dr Matt Willis, health officer for Marin County in Northern California. "And we're all left scrambling at the local and state level to extract resources and improvise solutions ... in a fractured health care system, in an under-resourced public health system."

Public health leaders from Dr Anthony Fauci down to officials in small communities have reported death threats and intimidation. Some have seen their home addresses published or been the subject of sexist attacks on social media. Fauci has said his wife and daughters have received threats.

In Ohio, the state's health director, Dr Amy Acton, resigned in June after months of pressure during which Republican lawmakers tried to strip her of her authority and armed protesters showed up at her house.

It was on Acton's advice that GOP Gov. Mike DeWine became the first governor to shut down schools statewide. Acton also called off the state's presidential primary in March just hours before polls were to open, angering those who saw it as an overreaction.

The executive director of Las Animas-Huerfano Counties District Health Department in Colorado found her car vandalized twice, and a group called Colorado Counties for Freedom ran a radio ad demanding that her authority be reduced. Kim Gonzales has remained on the job.

West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice forced the resignation of Public Health Commissioner Dr Cathy Slempp in June over what he said were discrepancies in the data. Slempp said the department's work had been hurt by outdated technology like fax machines and slow computer networks.

"We are driving a great aunt's Pinto when what you need is to be driving a Ferrari," Slempp said.

Tom Inglesby, director of the Center for Health Security at Johns Hopkins, was critical of Slempp's firing and said it was deeply concerning that public health officials who told "uncomfortable truths" to political leaders had been removed.

## Response

"That's terrible for the national response because what we need for getting through this, first of all, is the truth. We need data, and we need people to interpret the data and help political leaders make good judgments," Inglesby said.

Since 2010, spending on state public health departments has dropped 16% per capita, and the amount devoted to local health departments has fallen 18%, according to a KHN and AP analysis. At least 38,000 state and local public health jobs have disappeared since the 2008 recession, leaving a skeletal workforce for what was once viewed as one of the world's top public health systems.

Another sudden departure came Monday along the Texas border. Dr Jose Vazquez, the Starr County health authority, resigned after a proposal to increase his pay from \$500 to \$10,000 a month was rejected by county commissioners.

Starr County Judge Eloy Vera said Vazquez had been working 60 hours per week in the county, one of the poorest in the U.S. and recently one of those hit hardest by the virus. "He felt it was an insult," Vera said.

In Oklahoma, both the state health commissioner and state epidemiologist have been replaced since the outbreak began in March.

In rural Colorado, Emily Brown was fired in late May as director of the Rio Grande County Public Health Department after clashing with county commissioners over reopening recommendations. The person who replaced her resigned July 9.

Brown said she knows many public health department leaders who are considering resigning or retiring because of the strain. The months of nonstop and often unappreciated work are prompting many public health workers to leave, said Theresa Anselmo of the Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials.

"It will certainly slow down the pandemic response and become less coordinated," she said. "Who's going to want to take on this career if you're confronted with the kinds of political issues that are coming up?"



Health workers wait for patients to make PCR tests for the COVID-19 at Vilafranca del Penedes in the Barcelona province, Spain on Aug 10. As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a 'second wave' of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people - a foundation that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on. (AP)

## Is it safe to ride public transit during the pandemic?

Is it safe to ride public transit during the coronavirus pandemic?

It depends on a variety of factors, but there are ways to minimize risk.

The main way that the virus spreads is through droplets people spray when they talk, cough or sneeze. That means the best way to reduce the spread of infection on public transit and elsewhere is to wear a mask and stay 6 feet from others, experts say.

Transit systems around the world are requiring riders to wear masks and encouraging people to socially distance. Compliance could vary, especially as ridership levels start rebounding and trains and buses get more crowded. But there are other steps you can take to make trips less risky.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests traveling during non-peak hours, avoiding crowded spots in stations and stops, and skipping rows between seats when possible.

Surfaces are also believed to pose a risk, though to a lesser degree, and transit systems are employing a variety of cleaning techniques. Moscow and Shanghai have experimented with germ-killing ultraviolet light and Hong Kong has deployed a robot that sprays hydrogen peroxide. In New York, subways are shut down overnight overnight for cleaning.

Even so, the CDC says to avoid touching surfaces such as turnstiles and handrails if you can. (AP)

## Coronavirus

## 40pct of infected have no symptoms

## Global COVID-19 cases top 20mln

MITO, Japan, Aug 11, (AP): The number of coronavirus cases topped 20 million on Tuesday, more than half of them from the US, India and Brazil.

Health officials believe the actual number is much higher than that tally kept by Johns Hopkins University, given testing limitations and the fact that as many as 40% of those who are infected have no symptoms.

It took six months or so to get to 10 million cases after the virus first appeared in central China late last year. It took just over six weeks for that number to double.

An AP analysis of data through Aug 9 showed the US, India and Brazil together accounted for nearly two-thirds of all reported infections since the world hit 15 million coronavirus cases on July 22.

The number of new daily cases has continued to rise in India, hitting a rolling seven-day average of 58,768. In the US, which has more than 5 million cases, the average has decreased since July 22nd, but remains high at 53,813 new cases a day.

In the 45 days it took reported infections to double to 20 million, the number of reported virus deaths climbed to 736,191 from 499,506, according to the Johns Hopkins count. That's 236,685 new deaths, an average of more than 5,200 a day.

About one-fifth of reported deaths, or more than 163,000, have been in the US, the highest in the world.

Caseloads are still rising quickly in many other countries, including Indonesia and Japan.

In Mexico, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, like Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and President Donald Trump, seldom wears a mask and has resisted calls for a strict lockdowns, saying Mexicans should be convinced to observe social distancing, not forced to do so by police or fines.

With nearly 500,000 cases and more

than 50,300 deaths, Mexico has struggled with how to curb outbreaks given that just over half its people work off the books with no benefits or unemployment insurance.

A full lockdown would prove too costly for people with little savings and tenuous daily incomes, said Assistant Health Secretary Hugo López-Gatell, the president's point man on the epidemic, noting "we do not want a solution that would, in social terms, be more costly than the disease itself."

## Testing

Mexico's relatively high death rate results partly from the country having one of the world's highest rates of obesity and diabetes. There has also been relatively little testing. Of all tests done, 47% are positive, suggesting that only seriously ill people are getting tests. That has hindered contact tracing.

India reported 53,601 new cases Tuesday as its count of total infections neared 2.3 million. Its reported case fatality rate, of 2%, is much lower than in the US and Brazil.

In Japan, where outbreaks have been widening as officials urge people to consider this year's summer holidays "special" and stay home, the positivity rate of tests in Tokyo, the worst hit region, has been climbing but remains at 7%.

The pandemic has waxed and waned in many regions, with the U.K. and Spain seeing new outbreaks after the worst of the early waves of cases paralyzed much of Europe.

In Asia, Vietnam went from having reported no confirmed deaths and very few cases to battling fresh outbreaks that emerged in the seaside city of Danang. Australia was preparing to reopen travel with neighboring New Zealand, which has had no confirmed locally transmitted cases in more than 100 days, when fresh clusters of coro-

navirus cases popped up in Melbourne and the surrounding region.

That outbreak held steady Tuesday with 331 new cases and 19 more deaths in Victoria state, which includes Melbourne, raising hopes a strict, renewed lockdown in Australia's second-largest city was working. But authorities in Sydney were investigating a growing cluster of cases centered around a private Catholic school.

Meanwhile, outbreaks in mainland China and semi-autonomous Hong Kong declined, with the number of new community infections in China falling to 13, all in the northwestern region of Xinjiang. Hong Kong counted 69 new cases.

Similar to many other Asian countries, China requires testing and a two-week quarantine of all new arrivals and has barred most foreigners from entering the country.

Border closures, masks, lockdowns and infection data are now the new way of life for much of the world, not the politically combustible factors they are in the US.

A review by the Kaiser Health News service and The Associated Press found that at least 49 state and local public health leaders have resigned, retired or been fired since April across 23 states. The list has grown by more than 20 people since the AP and KHN started keeping track in June.

Contributing to that attrition and burnout of badly needed experts have been attacks on public health experts and institutions from the highest levels, including President Donald Trump, who has sidelined the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during the pandemic.

"The overall tone toward public health in the US is so hostile that it has kind of emboldened people to make these attacks," said Dr. Tom Frieden, former CDC director.



An elderly woman is helped by a health worker before screening her for COVID-19 symptoms in Dharavi, one of Asia's biggest slums, in Mumbai, India on Aug 11. India has the third-highest coronavirus caseload in the world after the United States and Brazil. (AP)



Merkel



Ardern

## Health

**N. Zealand reports 4 cases:** New Zealand Prime Minister **Jacinda Ardern** said Tuesday that authorities have found four cases of the coronavirus in one Auckland household from an unknown source, the first reported cases of local transmission in the country in 102 days.

Ardern said Auckland, the nation's largest city, will be moved to Alert Level 3 from midday Wednesday through midnight Friday, meaning that people will be asked to stay at home, while bars and many other businesses will be closed.

"These three days will give us time to assess the situation, gather information, make sure we have widespread contact tracing so we can find out more about how this case arose and make decisions about how to respond to it once we have further information," Ardern said at a hastily called news conference late Tuesday.

"I know that this information will be very difficult to receive," Ardern said. "We had all hoped not to find ourselves in this position again. But we had also prepared for it. And as a team, we have also been here before."

She said that traveling into Auckland will be banned unless people live there and are traveling home.

She said the rest of the country will be raised to Level 2 through Friday, meaning that mass gatherings will be limited to 100 attendees and people would need to socially distance themselves from each other. (AP)

**tCompany's product probed:** A Georgia company falsely claimed a vitamin D product it was selling could lower the risk of becoming infected with COVID-19, federal prosecutors said.

Matthew Ryncarz and his company Fusion Health and Vitality, which operated as Pharm Origins, are accused of saying a product called Immune Shot would lower the risk of getting COVID-19 by 50%, ac-

ording to federal prosecutors in Savannah. The product "bore false and misleading labeling," leading to a charge of selling a misbranded drug, prosecutors said in a news release Monday.

The company said in a statement released Monday that it was contacted by federal authorities over statements made on marketing materials for Immune shot, "a Vitamin D product we marketed for a few



A sample is collected at a Texas Division of Emergency Management free COVID-19 testing site at Minute Maid Park on Aug 8, in Houston. The newly-opened mega site, which has eight drive-thru lanes and four walk-up lanes, has the ability to process 2,000 tests per day. (AP)

weeks in March and early April." (AP)

**697 virus cases in Japan:** Japan reported 697 new cases of the coronavirus over the last 24 hours as of 4:00 pm (0700 GMT) on Tuesday, bringing the nation's total number to 50,078, the health ministry and local authorities said.

The country's death toll rose by five to 1,053. Tokyo confirmed 188 new cases, staying below 200 for the second straight day, which brought the cumulative cases in the Japanese capital to 16,252.

The tallies exclude those who were linked to the virus-hit Diamond Princess cruise ship in February. Since the government fully lifted a nationwide state of emergency late May, the number of daily new infections across the country has been rising. (KUNA)

**4 virus deaths in Germany:** Germany Tuesday announced four deaths resulting from the coronavirus pandemic while 966 people were infected with the disease in the past 24 hours. Robert Koch Institute said in a statement total deaths reached 9,201 and registered infections stood at 217,293.

The German authorities have warned against a second wave of the virus due to return of German tourists from their summer vacations. Germany's chancellor is **Angela Merkel**. (KUNA)