

Democracy Dies in Darkness

CDC scientist: Texas measles outbreak response hurt by funding cuts

The CDC is struggling to respond to the Texas measles outbreak. The U.S. has reported more than 700 cases in 25 states.

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By [Lena H. Sun](#)

A senior scientist overseeing the [measles](#) response by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said a recent pullback of pandemic funding from states has hurt Texas's response to its growing outbreak, now linked to 90 percent of cases in the United States.

"There are quite a number of resource requests coming in, in particular from Texas," said David Sugerman, a senior CDC scientist, during a meeting of the [CDC's vaccine advisory panel](#).

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"There are funding limitations in light of COVID-19 funding dissipating," Sugarman said Tuesday, referring to [\\$11.4 billion in coronavirus-related funds](#) that the Department of Health and Human Services ordered pulled back from state and local health departments and community organizations late last month. State and local officials had used funds allocated during the pandemic to help control infectious diseases, including measles and bird flu.

Sugerman's remarks were the first time a CDC official has been made available by the Trump administration to provide information about the second-worst U.S. measles outbreak in decades. Texas reported its first cases in late January. There has been no media briefing on the outbreak by CDC or HHS.

More than 700 measles cases have been reported in 25 states this year. Most of the cases are in Texas (561) and New Mexico (63). Increasing numbers are being reported in Kansas and Oklahoma, state health department data show. Genetic sequencing suggests that the southwest outbreak is also linked to outbreaks in Canada and Mexico, Sugerman said.

Texas is pulling resources and staff from other parts of its health department to respond to the outbreak, he said. The CDC is now “scraping to find the resources and personnel needed to provide support to Texas and other jurisdictions,” Sugerman said.

Sugerman told the panel the CDC had deployed 15 personnel to Texas to provide assistance from March 4 through April 1. Two of those staff were among those laid off at CDC as part of the widespread job cuts across the federal health agencies ordered by the Health and Human Services Department, according to multiple federal health officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. Sugerman said CDC was sending a second team Tuesday to help with the outbreak.

Measles outbreak

Latest reports from states of measles cases for the outbreak that began in late January in Texas, largely among unvaccinated children.

New Mexico death awaiting autopsy for confirmation of measles as cause of death.

Source: States of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas

DAN KEATING / THE WASHINGTON POST

“Over 90 percent of the current national cases are related to the southwest outbreak, driven by transmission in close-knit, undervaccinated communities with low vaccine coverage,” Sugerman said. The outbreak is centered in a local Mennonite community in Gaines County, Texas. Cases in Mexico and Canada have also been reported in local Mennonite communities, according to health officials.

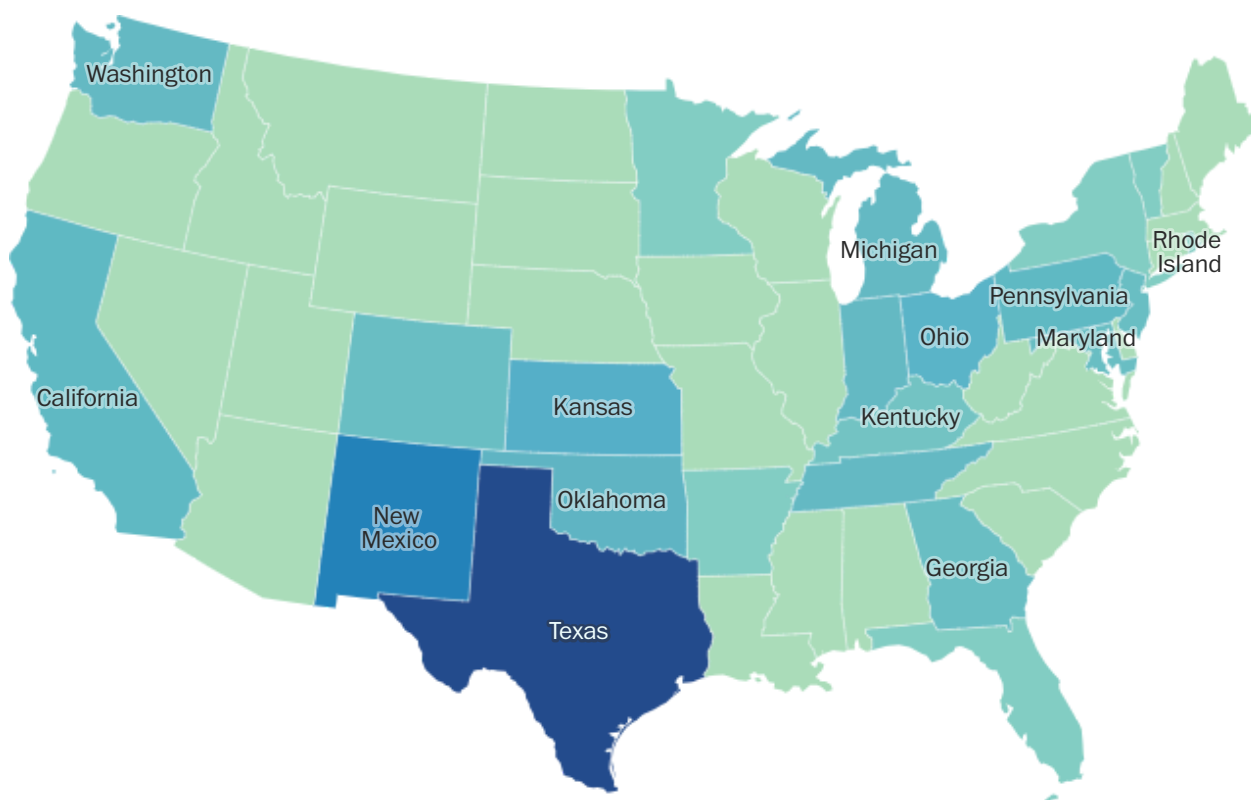
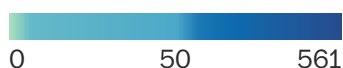
Three deaths have been reported in this outbreak, two in unvaccinated, otherwise healthy school-age children in Texas, and one in an unvaccinated adult from New Mexico who tested positive for measles. The official cause of death in the New Mexico case is under investigation.

During Tuesday's meeting of the vaccine panel, one of the newest members said enormous resources and personnel were required to contain the 2019 measles outbreak in the New York City and New York State region in the Orthodox Jewish communities. That large outbreak was part of the nearly 1,300 cases that year, a 25-year record high.

"In New York City, we had 649 cases of measles over a period of 11 months," said Jane Zucker, who was part of the city health department response. It cost the city health department about \$8.4 million and at the peak of the outbreak, the health department had 261 people deployed as part of its response, she said.

The response in New York "was an incredible feat, and something we're obviously trying to emulate here," Sugerman told her.

Latest measles case counts



"We are trying to support where we can," Sugerman said, adding that the outbreak response will be ongoing and will require significant financial resources. The public health response work for each measles cases is estimated to cost \$30,000 to \$50,000, he said, and "that adds up quite quickly."

The CDC has provided infection prevention control systems to seven hospitals and reviewed school infection control strategies, he said. The agency is holding biweekly calls with local health departments and with Canada and Mexico to share updates, and expanding testing for wastewater surveillance of measles at multiple sites in Texas and New Mexico.

Underscoring what local officials and public health experts have said, Sugerman said there are “quite a large amount of cases that are not reported and under reported.” Texas health officials say families have mentioned measles cases where people have recovered and never received testing.

Dan Keating contributed to this report.
