

Sequestration Would Leave CDC Short-handed in an Outbreak

Marcia Frellick - Oct 23, 2012

Resources needed to battle a public health emergency such as the current meningitis outbreak that has spread to 16 states would take a devastating blow under the across-the-board federal budget cuts set for January, according to public health officials.

"Everything's at stake," said Amanda Jezek, government relations director for the Infectious Diseases Society of America. Budget cuts mean shrinking staffs, and that means fewer people to track pathogens, interview patients, test cultures, and update the public. That will add time and difficulty to containing outbreaks and fighting disease, Jezek said.

Although numbers of jobs have not been specified, significant staff cuts would certainly come with sequestration, the indiscriminate budget axe set to strike government agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which has been leading the meningitis response.

At this time, the CDC is coordinating a multistate effort with the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to track down the fungal infection among patients who received an injection of a potentially contaminated steroid product from the New England Compounding Center, a Framingham, Massachusetts, pharmacy. As of October 22, the agencies were investigating 285 cases and 23 deaths related to the contaminated steroids.

Both agencies are among those that will be hit with roughly 8% cuts starting January 2 unless Congress intervenes. For the CDC, that means a loss of \$464 million. The FDA's cut will be \$318 million.

What also troubles public health officials is the way agency leaders' hands are tied in making the cuts.

"It's not as though CDC is told 'you have to cut 8% from your budget and you decide how to do it.' It's an 8% cut to each program and activity that has its own budget line," Jezek said.

Some programs are exempt from sequestration, including Social Security, unemployment insurance, veterans' benefits, Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and food stamps.

Scott Lilly, senior fellow with the think tank Center for American Progress, says the cuts in agencies whose biggest costs are in personnel, such as the CDC, will feel much bigger cuts than the 8%. When the cuts you have to make are in eliminating jobs, you have the additional costs of termination — payouts for sick time, vacation pay, and severance, for example. The alternative is to do the cutting with furloughs, he said, which would also pose staffing issues.

Cuts to the CDC would also result in another blow to state and local governments already reeling from budget cuts during the recession. By some reports, more than 70% of the CDC's budget is distributed to states, local entities, and other public and private partners.

Georges Benjamin, MD, executive director of the American Public Health Association, said the states and local health departments have lost 50,000 jobs since 2007.

Those were jobs in which people did the boots-on-the-ground work when public health emergencies strike, he said. They are the people who, in a crisis such as the meningitis outbreak, are scrambling to find patterns and clues in multiplying reports of infections.

"Someone has to physically go through all those reports,... talk to the doctor, find out which patient they used the medication on, find the patient.... If you don't have the resources, you just can't do it," Dr. Benjamin said.

Further budget cuts could make it harder to zero in on the less common pathogens, such as those at the root of the fungal meningitis outbreak.

"When you send a test out to the lab, unless you're thinking fungal cultures, you're not going to do them. You'll do the bacterial cultures first," Dr. Benjamin said. "In this era of cost containment, you're not going to do tests for things you don't think you're going to find."

The CDC declined to comment for this article on how sequestration would affect its response to health emergencies, referring all questions to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

The OMB has not broken down how much CDC programs would be reduced individually but says in its introduction in the Sequestration Transparency Act of 2012 that "[t]he report leaves no question that the sequestration would be deeply destructive to national security, domestic investments and core government functions."

In May, CDC Director Thomas Frieden, MD, MPH, was quoted in the education and advocacy group Research!America report "Sequestration: Health Research at the Breaking Point" as saying, "This is no time to let down our guard. An 8 percent - 10 percent reduction, on top of 50,000 front-line public health professionals already lost at the state and local levels, will risk costly and deadly spread of disease and failures to prevent tragic and expensive health problems."

Michael Tanner, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, says the dire warnings are overblown and that if the CDC focuses its resources on its core mission of fighting disease, there will be enough money to go around.

"The problem is CDC's mission has expanded dramatically and now includes everything from gun control to car seats to seat belts," Tanner told Medscape Medical News.

"They are covering all sorts of things that are not technically public health issues in the classic sense. They may have to cut back in other areas and focus their resources on something like meningitis, but that's what they should be doing in the first place," he said. "That's why they're there."

Dr. Benjamin and Jezek say that to see what happens when resources are reduced at the state and local level, look to Washington State's struggle to respond to its pertussis outbreak.

According to CDC data, Washington, which declared a pertussis epidemic in April, has nearly 9 times the number of cases this year than it did at the same time last year: 4348 vs 524. Forty-one new cases were reported just between October 13 and 17.

"Their ability to respond has been greatly diminished because of funding cuts," Dr. Benjamin said.

Jezek noted that the CDC plays a big role in making sure people get immunizations and booster shots at the appropriate intervals.

"That's another example of how we need to be investing more, not less," she said.

This is not the first time CDC will face cuts, but these universal cuts "are not like anything we've done before," Lilly said.

"It's closer to a government shutdown, but in some ways it's worse...because with a government shutdown the president has the authority to maintain services that protect life and property. Sequestration has no such provisions," he added.

Congress has until December 31 to pass a \$1.2 trillion deficit reduction package to avert the drastic cutting. Lilly says the best hope for that was before Congress broke for the fall recess. Now sequestration is caught up in the politics of a tax policy on which the parties cannot agree, he says, and consequently it is hard to see how sequestration could be resolved.

In the meantime, Dr. Benjamin says some of the effects of sequestration may have already started at the CDC and other government agencies.

"If you're in an organization that's not sure of its funding, you're not going to fill jobs," he said.