



The CDC's Laughable Pet Projects

Absurd spending priorities — not budget cuts — caused the feds to drop the ball on Ebola.

By Brendan Bordelon

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With the world reeling from a runaway Ebola outbreak and America's health infrastructure failing to stop the virus's spread, top federal officials are intently focused on the most pressing part of this crisis: finding someone else to blame.

Dr. Francis Collins, the Obama-appointed head of the National Institutes of Health, certainly has his priorities straight. "Frankly, if we had not gone through our 10-year slide in research support, we probably would have had a vaccine in time for this that would've gone through clinical trials and would have been ready," he [opined](#) on Friday, enthusiastically passing the buck to his congressional benefactors.

Democrats immediately seized on the good doctor's implication. "Gee, thanks Republicans!" [tweeted](#) former Clinton strategist Paul Begala. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) [cobbled together](#) an online banner ad accusing the GOP of "vot[ing] to cut CDC's [Centers for Disease Control's] budget to fight Ebola." Progressive non-profit The Agenda Project [released](#) a video juxtaposing Republican calls for budget cuts with dead and dying Ebola patients. "Republican cuts kill," the ad solemnly intones. "Vote."

This latest midterm elections' ploy ignores the obvious. The budgets of the NIH and CDC have been anything but stagnant. And the agencies themselves hardly focus their spending on vaccines and other key policy priorities.

According to data compiled by the Cato Institute from the non-partisan Office of Management and Budget, the NIH's inflation-adjusted outlays [skyrocketed](#) between 1996 and 2005, more than doubling from \$14.8 to \$32.4 billion. Spending flatlined for a few years after that (the beginning of Collins' purported "ten-year slide"), but shot up to \$36.1 billion by 2011 due to the stimulus. The last few years saw a decline back to 2004 levels of funding — just after the unprecedented boom of the late Clinton and early Bush eras. As is always the case with government funding, the public is expected to ignore any spending explosion if it's followed by even a modest slowdown in growth.

The story's much the same at the CDC, though its director, to be fair, has yet to politicize an unprecedented human tragedy. OMB numbers [show](#) a rapid budget escalation at that agency in

late '90s and early '00s, catapulting from \$3.1 billion in 1996 to \$5.8 billion in 2003. From there the budget kept rising, soaring to \$7.5 billion in 2010 before gently declining to \$6.8 billion in 2014.

How did the CDC and NIH utilize these spending spikes? Even a cursory look at some of the agencies' pet projects over the past decade reveals a stunning proclivity to waste funds on absurd schemes and perks completely unrelated to controlling disease or promoting health.

Just after the Clinton-era surge, the CDC chose to invest the influx of cash in a fancy new headquarters and fitness center for their employees. The new Arlen Specter Headquarters (fittingly named after the chairman of the CDC's appropriations committee) [cost](#) \$110 million — including \$10 million for furniture alone — a cost of \$12,000 per employee. The nearby fitness center included \$200,000 for light-shows, saunas, and zero-gravity “mood chairs” — all free for employees on CDC's Atlanta campus.

The CDC also spent at least \$1.7 million on a Hollywood liaison to make sure medical portrayals in TV shows were accurate. And the CDC-funded Stop AIDS Project in San Francisco included a four-part erotic-writing workshop, “practical tips for friendly relations” with prostitutes, and a “bar night” for HIV-positive men. How do any of these items help “control” disease?

The NIH's spending is even more laughable. The institute [granted](#) \$5 to \$7 million for a gay-porn website designed to instruct about HIV, \$667,000 for a [study](#) on the health benefits of rerun television, \$1 million on the sexual proclivities of fruit flies, \$600,000 on [why chimpanzees throw their poop](#), \$350,000 on the [importance of imagination while golfing](#), and \$550,000 to determine that heavy drinking in one's 30s can lead to feelings of immaturity.

Instead of focusing on core missions like an Ebola vaccine, Democrats would see the CDC expand their frivolous activities to new (and expensive) heights. In 2013 President Obama [asked for millions](#) so the agency could study the link between video games and violence. And earlier this year congressional Democrats [pushed](#) for a \$60-million CDC study of gun violence, labelling it “a public health crisis.”

Before attempting to browbeat Congress and frighten the public with misleading claims of declining budgets, Collins and other government health professionals should take a long look in the mirror. A deadly virus is sweeping the globe. People are dying. Fruit flies, saunas, and reruns can wait — and always could.