

Profile

Mandy Cohen: public health advocate and Director of the US CDC



In the year since internal medicine physician Mandy Cohen became the 20th Director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), she has not spent a great deal of time in her office at the CDC's Atlanta, GA, headquarters. Her efforts to restore the public's trust in the agency, which was damaged in the COVID-19 pandemic, have taken her so far to 22 states and nine countries. "Transparency and simple clear communications are incredibly important", said Cohen, who President Joe Biden appointed to lead the CDC in 2023. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, political interference by the Trump Administration and the CDC's own mistakes tarnished its global reputation as a source for impartial scientific and public health information. "During my first year here, I think we're very much focused on better and faster communication that is simple and clear—that this is what we know, and this is what we don't know", she said. "I think you're seeing that with our response to avian flu, which at the moment, we can continue to say the threat to the public is low. But that's what we know today and we know these viruses change", she told *The Lancet* in July, 2024. When Cohen arrived at the CDC, it was implementing recommendations from an independent review of its pandemic activities that identified a litany of problems, including delays in publishing data, inadequate staffing, and confusing guidance. Addressing these problems was complicated by the anti-vaccine, anti-science movement that grew in the Trump Administration and persists today.

Cohen's willingness to take on such challenges does not surprise Howard Forman, Professor of Radiology and Biomedical Imaging, Public Health, Management, and Economics at Yale University, and one of her advisers when she was a medical student there. "She was absolutely focused on figuring out how can we deliver better health care to everyone and recognising the failures that existed in our system", he said. "She's the type of person who wants to fix things."

Cohen grew up in a New York City suburb and was inspired to become a doctor by her mother, who worked as a hospital nurse practitioner. "As a kid, I remember her being stopped in the grocery store by someone thanking her for helping a family member in the emergency room." But her mother also told her about seriously ill patients who went to the hospital's emergency department because they could not afford to see a community-based doctor. "It really made me start to think about the [health care] system, even though I probably didn't have that language yet", she said. "But I was always very interested in whether the system is working for everyone." The combination of caring "for strangers and helping them out in a moment of crisis and the intellectual rigour of scientific knowledge brought me to the field of medicine" Her father was a middle-school guidance counsellor and the importance of public service was often a topic of discussion in her family:

"At the forefront of conversations in our home was how we use our time here on this planet to improve our communities."

Cohen earned a medical degree in 2005 from Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, CT, and a master's in public health in 2004 from the Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health in Boston, MA. After a stint as the Women's Health Services Deputy Director at the Department of Veterans Affairs, she became Executive Director of the advocacy group Doctors for America in 2009. The next year she joined the Obama Administration as a Senior Advisor at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and went on to become its Chief Operations Officer and Chief of Staff. Then, in 2017, she further honed her leadership skills as North Carolina's Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services and worked there during the first 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The role "gave her a CEO level of responsibility", said David Blumenthal, Professor of the Practice of Public Health and Health Policy at the Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, a former Obama Administration official, and an attending physician who supervised Cohen's work as an intern at Massachusetts General Hospital. Blumenthal said she successfully "navigated North Carolina's fraught political terrain", dominated by a Republican-controlled legislature and the Democratic Governor who appointed her. "It was trial by fire", he said. In 2022, Cohen became Executive Vice President of Aledade and CEO of Aledade Care Solutions, a private network of primary care providers, before joining the CDC.

Since taking the helm at the CDC, one of her priorities has been completing action on recommendations from the post-pandemic review, including improving communications with the public and local governments and strengthening emergency response capabilities. Other priorities include improving mental health care and protecting the health of young families. "My North Star has been about building healthier communities", she said. "Sometimes that's about access to doctors and hospitals and sometimes that's about larger issues, and how we build healthier communities where we live, work, play, and pray." That goal has motivated Cohen in her career. "I loved being a physician, but I'm always thinking about the broader context in which my patients live." Looking forward, Cohen envisions a CDC that marshals its vast data infrastructure and resources to strengthen public health and health-care protections: "We are getting better at our communications over the course of this year, and moving our data into action much more quickly than we've ever done before." When that happens, "people can know what's happening in their community, and then they can make good choices for them and their family to protect themselves".

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