



New CDC Director promises to protect vaccines and support the agency's "exhausted" scientists

Erica Schwartz has sought to reassure staff working at the embattled agency. Washington Correspondent Susan Jaffe reports.

A week after Erica Schwartz took the helm at the beleaguered US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Aug 12, she convened an all-staff meeting. Schwartz fielded questions from staff and pledged to advocate for the agency, which has been gutted through the loss of thousands of workers and steep funding cuts. She assured staff that she would not hesitate to disagree with her boss, Robert F Kennedy Jr, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, who has presided over the reorganisation.

However, disputes with Kennedy can end badly. When the last Senate-confirmed Director, Susan Monarez, refused to "pre-approve"—as she wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*—Kennedy's vaccine recommendations without knowing the details, he fired her after just 29 days. Her dismissal a year ago triggered several senior leadership resignations and plunged the agency further into turmoil. Kennedy has denied Monarez's account of the events surrounding her departure and continues to disparage the agency. Earlier this month, he visited the CDC to participate in a ceremony honoring the policeman killed by a self-proclaimed anti-vaxxer who went on a shooting rampage at the agency's Atlanta headquarters. Despite the somber occasion, he told a gathering that included some of the agency's scientific experts, "You can't just trust a scientist, because scientists have biases, too", *The Washington Post* reported. He also accused them of "hoarding their own data".

Schwartz is the first Black woman to serve as CDC Director. She is an occupational medicine physician, lawyer, a retired Rear Admiral in

the Commissioned Corps of the US Public Health Service, and was Deputy Surgeon General during the first Trump administration. Most recently, she was President of Insurance Solutions for Medicare and Retirement at the nation's largest health insurance company, UnitedHealthcare. In an agreement filed with the Office of Government Ethics, she promised to resign from the insurer and from the boards of two other health-related companies if she became CDC Director, according to *The Washington Post*. She would also sell her investments in the three businesses and recuse herself for 2 years from any CDC actions involving them.

Schwartz told CDC staff that she has met several times with Kennedy since being appointed. She felt comfortable working with him and "will continue to speak truth to power", according to a recording of the hour-long session provided to *The Lancet*. "I will make sure that my disagreements are known", she said, but "probably in private, not in front of the media".

When a staffer asked if Schwartz would roll back Kennedy's changes to the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP)—now comprised of his hand-picked members—the audience responded with enthusiastic applause. "I absolutely believe that vaccines are safe and effective", she said and noted that she ran an immunisation clinic when she served in the Navy: "I have personally given thousands of vaccines." The ACIP's work is on hold while a lawsuit filed by medical and public health groups challenging Kennedy's actions moves through the courts.

Kennedy told a congressional hearing in April, 2026, that he supported Schwartz's nomination

for CDC Director and denied firing Monarez because they disagreed about vaccines. Yet when asked if he would implement Schwartz's vaccine guidance without interference, Kennedy said, "I'm not going to make that kind of commitment".

After a Republican Senate majority, along with Virginia Democrat Senator Tim Kaine, voted on Aug 5 to confirm Schwartz as the next CDC Director, Kennedy congratulated her in a post on X: "Dr Schwartz is the most qualified leader ever nominated for this role", he wrote. "I look forward to working with Dr Schwartz to restore public trust, strengthen the CDC's core mission, and Make America Healthy Again." Kennedy's praise for Schwartz drew criticism on X from Make America Healthy Again supporters, who accused him of betraying their movement.

Senator Kaine said in a written statement that he broke ranks with his Democratic colleagues to vote for Schwartz "because continuing to leave this post vacant at a time when we are dealing with various outbreaks, from measles to *Cyclospora*, is not in the best interests of the American people. Her experience—which includes over two decades of uniformed service—qualifies her for this role."

At the staff meeting, Schwartz was also asked about an executive order issued by President Trump on Aug 10, 2 days before she became director. It recommends that seven immunisations be eliminated from the childhood vaccine schedule and the combined measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine should be separated and administered in three separate medical visits. The order is similar to ACIP's vaccine recommendations that are tied up in litigation.

For more on Monarez's dismissal see [World Report Lancet 2025; 406: 1074–75](#)

For more on Kennedy's remarks earlier this month see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2026/08/07/rfk-jr-questions-scientists-access-data-cdc-campus-one-year-after-shooting/>

For more on Schwartz's financial arrangements see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-intelligence/health-brief/2026/06/26/health-brief-inside-cdc-nominees-finances/>

For the executive order see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/08/delivering-gold-standard-childhood-vaccine-recommendations-for-americans/>

For the **Associated Press** article see <https://apnews.com/article/cdc-programs-cuts-jobs-738f3f245f4cb68ff485c804af92832f>

Schwartz said she will represent the CDC on a taskforce created by the executive order to study how to best implement the recommendations. She promised to solicit input “from our incredibly talented leadership” and to “make sure you know what we’re doing as part of that task force”. Until ACIP’s future is decided in court, she said that the President’s order provides an opportunity to explore “all the possibilities regarding immunizations and patient–parent choice”.

That is not enough, said Debra Houry, the CDC’s former Chief Medical Officer who resigned over concerns of scientific integrity and political interference following Monarez’s dismissal. Schwartz should not wait for the taskforce to meet, Houry said. “She can speak now to the evidence (100 peer countries do not separate the MMR vaccine and Japan, which removed the mumps component, has moved towards putting it back) and the unintended consequences that will result in harm to children with delayed vaccinations.”

In addition, Houry said that Schwartz “should convene scientists now in the agency to review the vaccine schedule and associated websites such as the one on autism and ensure the information gets updated so that it is scientifically accurate and not based on ideology”.

But in a confrontation with Kennedy, Houry predicts Schwartz will likely lose. “I want Dr Schwartz to succeed because CDC is important for the nation and the world”, said Houry, currently a Senior Fellow of the Yale University School of Public Health and consultant to local health departments. “But she needs to come out strongly in support of science and data and to hold the line. Unfortunately, if she truly does her job and the Secretary is still in place, she won’t have a job.”

Schwartz faces a host of other challenges, said Tom Frieden, who served as CDC Director during the Obama administration. “The past year and a half have dealt a body blow to the CDC with persistent attacks including a

physical attack on the CDC campus, loss of thousands of staff, demonization by the person in charge of overseeing the CDC, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and constant drumbeat of misinformation about vaccines in particular and health issues more generally”, said Frieden, President and Chief Executive Officer of Resolve to Save Lives. Leading the CDC “is a hard job in the best of times, and these are not the best of times”, he said.

Increasing the number of staff is particularly important as the CDC contends with some record-breaking disease outbreaks, including the highest number of measles cases in three decades and almost 16 000 cases of cyclosporiasis in 47 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, making it one of the largest foodborne illness outbreaks in US history. In DR Congo, the aggressive Bundibugyo virus disease outbreak is spreading faster than any previous Ebola outbreak, according to WHO.

“It is getting ahead of us and continuing to outpace the response”, said Frieden. “The CDC is the nation’s first line of defense against microbes, and it does that not only through its own staff, but primarily by supporting state and local governments and by partnering with countries all around the world.”

At the staff meeting, Schwartz was asked how she would boost hiring: “We are at a significant reduction in our employees and that makes it really hard on the rest of us to pick up the slack because the work doesn’t change”, her questioner said. “We were already under resourced and understaffed in public health as you know and now it’s even worse...what is your plan on helping us get back up to capacity so that we aren’t burning out anymore and we can retain the people that we do have, and we can get us some help here?” Since the start of Trump’s second term in January, 2025, the CDC’s workforce has shrunk by nearly 3500 positions (27%) according to federal data reported

by *The Conversation*. (The CDC and HHS did not respond to requests to interview Schwartz or for CDC employment data.)

She agreed that CDC employees are “exhausted, and they’re questioning ‘is this going to be the new normal?’”. After nearly a year without a Senate-confirmed CDC leader, Schwartz said, “The good news is I’m here”. She will be talking with her leadership team “to find out what are our specific needs, what are our specific concerns, what are the critical areas that if we don’t get these filled, we will fail in our mission for the American people”.

Schwartz referred to an Associated Press article that described what it called “zombie” programmes funded by Congress but with no one working on them because their staff were laid off or are on administrative leave. The article cited examples gathered by current and former employees, including \$246 million for the Office of Smoking and Health, \$41 million for an Alzheimer’s disease risk prevention and surveillance programme, and \$18 million to prevent drug overdoses in tribal communities.

During Schwartz’s nomination hearing on July 15, Kaine asked about the Office of Smoking and Health and whether she would “bring back a sufficient staff infrastructure to make sure that you can carry out the mission for which Congress appropriates funds to the CDC”. She promised to work with his office on the matter and added, “I will always follow the law”. Kaine later told *The Lancet* he appreciated her answer, “and will hold her to it”.

After the meeting, the National Public Health Coalition, whose members include former and current CDC employees, urged Schwartz to “be a forceful advocate for rebuilding the agency’s workforce, protecting its scientific integrity and ensuring CDC experts are able to do their jobs without interference”.

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