



THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Gillibrand and Schumer:

Thank you for your letters dated February 17, 2025, and August 5, 2025, regarding staffing cuts and administrative issues for the World Trade Center (WTC) Health Program. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) remains committed to ensuring that 9/11 first responders and survivors in the WTC Health Program receive the critical health care services they need. In collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), HHS ensures that the WTC Health Program's operations and health care services are maintained.

As of May 13, 2025, all WTC Health Program staff who had been previously terminated, were reinstated. HHS's commitment to the WTC Health Program remains steadfast, and we will continue working to uphold the bipartisan commitments made to support those affected by the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

Please see the enclosure for responses to the issues raised in your letters.

Sincerely,

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

Enclosure

Department of Health and Human Services Responses

1. Communication Pause and Travel Restrictions

On January 21, 2025, HHS issued a pause on external communications and public appearances that were not directly related to emergencies or critical to preserving health. This was a temporary pause to allow the new Administration to develop a process for reviewing and approving certain documents, including communications. As a result, the WTC Health Program federal staff and contractors were temporarily unable to attend the Responder and Survivor Steering Committee meetings. However, in November 2025, WTC Health Program staff attended both the Responder and Survivor Steering Committee meetings and plan to attend both Committees' meetings again in February 2026.

On January 21, 2025, HHS also issued a travel pause. HHS implemented a travel approval process for mission-critical activities. The WTC Health Program has since received approval to travel for several meetings to ensure the effective and efficient maintenance of WTC Health Program business and health care operations.

2. Upcoming Contract Renewals

CDC and the WTC Health Program understand the importance of these contracts and have maintained uninterrupted clinical care for Program members. We are prioritizing our contract renewal work to ensure that members' medications are filled without disruption, that providers continue to receive timely payments, and that internal and external federal staff and contractor resources are available to fulfill the mission of the WTC Health Program. We are committed to preventing any potential disruptions to clinical care and are taking proactive steps to minimize delays.

3. Research Grant Awards

The WTC Health Program administers research grants in coordination with the NIOSH Office of Extramural Coordination & Special Projects (OECSP). OECSP was subject to the April 1, 2025, Reduction in Force notices, but those notices were rescinded on January 13, 2026, and some OECSP staff have since returned. Between April 1, 2025, and January 13, 2026, staff in OECSP were approved to return from administrative leave to process WTC Health Program research grant actions, ensuring that the statutorily required research activities continue. In collaboration with NIOSH, the WTC Health Program issued over 30 extensions for previously awarded research projects and awarded 16 newly funded research projects in fiscal year 2025.

In December 2025, the WTC Health Program and OECSP published a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) to extend the WTC Health Registry. This NOFO is open until February 20, 2026, and is available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/360555>. In addition, the WTC Health Program developed three NOFO forecasts to solicit research applications that address critical knowledge gaps, improve the treatment and well-being of responders and survivors affected by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and develop and implement

effective strategies to identify, recruit, and retain eligible participants in the Youth Research Cohort using Community Engaged Research (CEnR) principles. These three forecasts are:

- Cooperative Research Agreements Related to the World Trade Center Health Program (U01). This forecast is available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/356163>.
- Exploratory/Developmental Grants Related to the World Trade Center Health Program (R21). This forecast is available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/360753>.
- Promoting World Trade Center Health Program Youth Research Cohort Recruitment and Retention Using Principles of Community Engaged Research (CEnR) to Build Community Participation (U01). This forecast is available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/360752>.

4. Hiring Freeze

On January 20, 2025, the President issued a Presidential Memorandum enacting a freeze on the hiring of federal civilian employees. The freeze was renewed in April and again in July. However, the hiring freeze ended in October 2025, and new hiring processes are currently being established. The WTC Health Program is seeking to ensure staffing is at sufficient capacity by pursuing all allowable methods to prioritize and fill vacant positions.

5. Petition Process

All petitions requesting the addition of non-cancer health conditions to the List of WTC-Related Health Conditions (List) continue to be processed as outlined in the Program's *Policy and Procedures for Adding Non-Cancer Conditions to the List of WTC-Related Health Conditions* available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/wtc/policies.html>. Since the end of 2024, the WTC Health Program has lost key scientific staff, slowing petition processing. After each petition completes the scientific literature review, the scientific evaluation, and other procedural steps, including CDC clearance, the Administrator of the WTC Health Program will publish his determination regarding whether to add the petitioned health condition in the *Federal Register*.

6. Administration for a Healthy America (AHA) Reorganization

HHS, CDC, and, if reorganized, AHA will ensure that the WTC Health Program can successfully serve the more than 140,000 responders and survivors enrolled in the WTC Health Program and meet its statutory requirements.