

Protecting Americans Against Biological Threats

Strengthening Response and Recovery

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. U.S. preparedness against biological threats is at its lowest level in decades. U.S. adversaries recognize biowarfare as an area of asymmetric advantage. At the same time, the risks of naturally occurring dangerous pathogens and lab accidents continue to proliferate.
2. The decentralized, federated U.S. government structure is problematic for biodefense. Federal, state, tribal, local, and territorial (STLT) authorities seldom collaborate effectively. National and STLT response and recovery planning make poor use of private sector capacity.
3. Reserve funding is insufficient, hiring authorities are inflexible, core capabilities have been dismantled, and response and recovery planning and exercises occur infrequently and seldom address gaps. Growing mistrust of government authorities and pervasive misinformation will impede future responses.
4. U.S. disengagement from international organizations blocks data exchange, emergency coordination, and recovery.
5. There is a path forward that attracts bipartisan support through actions to strengthen the White House, STLT capabilities, communications, investigations, private sector integration, and trade and international agreements.

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This is the fourth in a series of briefs about making the United States safer against rising biological threats.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

President Trump's 2018 National Biodefense Strategy highlights the need to rapidly respond to future bioincidents to limit domestic health, educational, economic, and national security impacts. Multiple recent events and exercises have validated sustained gaps in these areas. Failure to plan for and execute a successful response and recovery is likely to result in a smaller national workforce, fuel economic decline, and compromise national security. Innovative communication plans are needed to rebuild trust. It is essential to characterize deliberate biological attacks rapidly and accurately and identify and hold the perpetrators accountable. Evolving technologies offer new ways to identify and attribute the source of deliberate biological incidents if the United States invests in these capabilities. A well-coordinated response across all levels of government and the private sector is achievable if roles and responsibilities are defined and response capabilities are funded and exercised.

Successful recovery after a bioincident is critical to restore the community, the economy, and the environment. It creates societal resilience and deters adversaries from considering the use of biological weapons against the United States. Presently, recovery planning remains stuck in a rudimentary stage.

LEGISLATIVE OR POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Several pieces of legislation provide opportunities to strengthen the U.S. biodefense enterprise in this Congress. These include the National Defense Authorization Act, the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act, the [Department of State Policy Provisions Act](#), and several [bills](#) advanced by the National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology.

The president has directed updates to the [Global Health Security Strategy](#), may update the National Biodefense Strategy, and has released the [America First Global Health Strategy](#) and [National Security Strategy](#). Each of these policies justifies action across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches to improve the rapid response to and recovery from future biological emergencies, to mitigate their impact on community well-being, economic stability, and national security.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries face excessive debt burdens with limited prospects for economic recovery, precluding investments in biopreparedness. In 2026, the United States will host the G20 summit, which could advance disaster recovery initiatives and debt swap proposals through the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and regional banks.

CHALLENGES & RISKS

A Decentralized, Inadequately Resourced System: The U.S. federated structure impedes a unified response plan, shared commodities, and coordinated action. Few federal or STLT plans make effective use of the private sector. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, responsible for fulfilling the National Response Framework (NRF), has seen its budget, staff, and programs decline in 2025, weakening preparedness. The elimination of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) unit for biological threats degrades the U.S. ability to manage deliberate biological events and to hold perpetrators accountable.

Weak Surge Capabilities: Recent reductions in federal support for STLT programs exacerbate long-standing weaknesses. Baseline compacts and legislation are ambiguous and underfunded, including the Regional Disaster Health Response System, the National Disaster Medical System, the Public Health Emergency Fund, the Infectious Diseases Rapid Response Reserve Fund, and the Stafford Act. The United States is **projected** to have a shortage of 141,000 physicians and hundreds of thousands of other healthcare workers by 2038. There are inadequate mechanisms to deploy additional staff through direct hiring authorities, incentives for retired and volunteer workers, agreements to recognize licensure across state lines, and flexible pay authorities. Few reliable pathways exist to leverage the U.S. private sector and academic bench to fill gaps.

Public Mistrust: Public mistrust in public health rose post-Covid-19 and worsened in 2025. Restoring trust requires humility, transparency, and intensive community engagement. Until public confidence is restored, even the most elementary and well-designed emergency response plans will falter.

Narrow Recovery Planning: Long-term recovery rests on supporting the frontline workforce, regaining educational losses, and researching long-term impacts. Recovery has been insufficiently integrated into pandemic plans and budgets.

Weakened Global Capabilities and Partnerships: The U.S. capacity to steer international recovery from biological emergencies declined in 2025 due to reductions in budgets and staff, the shuttering of the U.S. Agency for International Development, weakened disaster response capabilities at the Department of State, and the U.S. withdrawal from the World Health Organization—this raises risks to U.S. citizens and businesses abroad, and U.S. national security overall.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. White House:** Mandate and staff a White House Office of Biopreparedness (WHOBP) as a senior directorate on the National Security Council to coordinate the national response to and recovery from biological emergencies, with budgetary and spending approval authority across civilian, military, and intelligence agencies. Align federal, private sector, and academic partners behind a unified research agenda; incentivize STLT data-sharing and scope STLT needs; coordinate medical countermeasure supply and deployment; and forecast recovery needs.
- 2. Essential Capabilities:** Restore funding and enhance authorities to fulfill the NRF. Restore and invest in domestic and global investigational capabilities to prosecute deliberate biological incidents at the ODNI, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Central Intelligence Agency, and U.S. Departments of Defense and State.
- 3. STLT:** Support STLT authorities in preparing for and responding to deliberate, naturally occurring, and accidental biological threats. Resource STLT emergency reserve funds and ensure flexible hiring and licensure recognition across state borders.
- 4. Communications:** Require executive branch agencies to invest in a network of trusted partners, including clinicians, to make health communications more accessible and trustworthy to skeptical communities.
- 5. Private Sector:** Require all federally funded response and recovery planning to involve private sector partners. Create a public-private partnership model built on technological contributions, resource needs, information sharing, and support for excess capacity and liability protections.
- 6. International Partners:** Execute bilateral agreements that enhance response and recovery coordination; leverage the U.S. leadership of the G20; restore funding for bilateral, multilateral, and regional partners; create emergency reserve facilities; and create flexibilities to adapt bilateral contracts to crisis needs. Press international financial institutions to expand rapid financing vehicles for low- and middle-income countries. Mandate the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Trade Representative to begin negotiating agreements with trading partners that enhance the control of biological threats to agricultural animals.

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