

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*



## Ousted vaccine official to warn of 'darkest winter' if virus returns without better response

By **John Wagner**

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Rick Bright, a former top vaccine official removed from his post last month, will testify to Congress on Thursday that the United States faces the “darkest winter in modern history” if it does not develop a more coordinated national response to the coronavirus before an expected resurgence later this year.

“Our window of opportunity is closing,” Bright says in prepared testimony submitted to a subcommittee of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. “If we fail to develop a national coordinated response, based in science, I fear the pandemic will get far worse and be prolonged, causing unprecedented illness and fatalities. While it is terrifying to acknowledge the extent of the challenge that we currently confront, the undeniable fact is there will be a resurgence of the COVID19 this fall, greatly compounding the challenges of seasonal influenza and putting an unprecedented strain on our health care system. Without clear planning and implementation of the steps that I and other experts have outlined, 2020 will be darkest winter in modern history.”

The first priority, he says, is being “truthful with the American people.”

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“They want the truth. They can handle the truth,” Bright says.

Bright, former director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, was removed April 20 after having served in the position for nearly four years, and transferred to a narrower role at the National Institutes of Health.

In his prepared testimony, Bright also touches on a whistleblower complaint in which he asserted he was pressured by Department of Health and Human Services leadership to make “potentially harmful drugs widely available,” including chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, which President Trump has repeatedly heralded.

“I believe this transfer was in response to my insistence that the government invest funding allocated to BARDA by Congress to address the COVID-19 pandemic into safe and scientifically vetted solutions, and not in drugs, vaccines and other technologies that lack scientific merit,” Bright says.

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Bright is scheduled to appear at a hearing Thursday morning at the invitation of Rep. Anna G. Eshoo (D-Calif.), who chairs the health subcommittee. Debra Katz, an attorney for Bright, confirmed last week that Bright plans to appear despite being under “massive stress” in the wake of his transfer.

His appearance adds to a dramatic week of testimony on Capitol Hill.

On Tuesday, Anthony S. Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, and other Trump administration health officials warned the United States risks new coronavirus outbreaks and possibly a broad resurgence nationwide if states and cities reopen too quickly.

In his prepared testimony, Bright argues that “it is painfully clear that we were not as prepared as we should have been” to combat the coronavirus outbreak.

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“We missed early warning signals, and we forgot important pages from our pandemic playbook,” he says. “There will be plenty of time to identify gaps for improvement. For now, we need to focus on getting things right going forward.”

He says the Trump administration still lacks a national testing strategy and needs to ramp up production of essential equipment and supplies.

In his 89-page whistleblower complaint filed last week, Bright portrays himself as an administration health official trying to sound the alarm about the virus beginning in early January. He said he called for the rapid development of treatments and vaccines, as well as the stockpiling of additional N95 face masks and ventilators, at a time when HHS political leadership, including Secretary Alex Azar, appeared to him to be underestimating the threat.

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He also notes he clashed with his boss, HHS assistant secretary for preparedness and response Robert Kadlec, for at least two years. Bright alleges in the complaint that Kadlec and others pressured him to buy drugs and medical products for the nation's stockpile of emergency medical equipment from companies that were linked politically to the administration and that he resisted such efforts.

HHS issued a brief comment last week that did not directly address Bright's allegations.

“Dr. Bright was transferred to NIH to work on diagnostics testing — critical to combating covid-19 — where he has been entrusted to spend upward of \$1 billion to advance that effort,” said HHS spokeswoman Caitlin Oakley. “We are deeply disappointed that he has not shown up to work on behalf of the American people and lead on this critical endeavor.”

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*Yasmeen Abutaleb and Laurie McGinley contributed to this report.*



