

ARLINGTON, Va., Oct. 3, 2013 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- With the federal government shutdown and federal public health workers deemed "non-essential," U.S. public health has been compromised at a time when we are facing numerous disease outbreaks, a hurricane watch, and a host of other new and emerging threats, such as MERS coronavirus and H7N9. The shutdown has also placed 9 million women and children at risk because WIC funding has stopped.

"This is the ticking time bomb scenario. The public health enterprise needs all components—federal, state, and local—to be functioning optimally to safeguard the American public," says ASTHO Executive Director Paul E. Jarris, MD, MBA. "We never know when the next severe public health emergency will strike. If it occurs when federal public health agencies are operating at minimal capacity, the consequences in American lives will be dire."

CDC has furloughed more than 65 percent of its workforce and is unable to conduct in-depth disease outbreak investigations during the shutdown. States rely on CDC to help identify outbreaks, particularly ones that cross state lines.

"CDC had to furlough 8,754 people," CDC Director Thomas Frieden wrote on Twitter on Oct. 1. "They protected you yesterday, can't tomorrow. Microbes/other threats didn't shut down. We are less safe."

Public health learned a year ago how important rapid identification is when the multistate fungal meningitis outbreak occurred. Working together, the U.S. public health system saved hundreds if not thousands of lives as the source of the contamination was identified, potentially tainted product was pulled, and those potentially exposed were contacted and began treatment regimens as soon as symptoms occurred.

Nine million of our most vulnerable pregnant women and infants will lose access to nutritious food and health services as states quickly draw down and deplete the funding they have available. As a result of the shutdown, no additional WIC funding will be available.

Preparedness for natural and manmade disasters has also been put at risk during the shutdown. A hurricane is developing in the Gulf of Mexico and could reach land anywhere from Louisiana

to

Florida

. However, the HHS Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response can only maintain minimal readiness and limited staffing, so states and localities will have to respond to disasters with diminished federal capabilities.

America's food is less safe now than it was before the shutdown. Food inspection for meat, poultry, and eggs continues during the shutdown, but FDA has halted inspections and oversight of the rest of the food in the supply chain — food that can still result in foodborne disease outbreaks. Two years ago, *Listeria* linked to cantaloupes killed 33 people. Without routine inspections, such outbreaks could increase, and, as already stated, CDC's ability to identify and trace them would be compromised.

In addition to these direct impacts, state and federal public health agencies are usually in constant contact with each other, and the federal shutdown is having a negative impact on the health and wellness of Americans.

ASTHO is the national nonprofit organization representing the public health agencies of the United States

, the U.S. territories, and the

District of Columbia

, as well as the more than 100,000 public health professionals these agencies employ. ASTHO members, the chief health officials of these jurisdictions, are dedicated to formulating and influencing sound public health policy and to ensuring excellence in state-based public health practice.

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Public Health Put at Risk by Government Shutdown

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