



Preparing for the Future

Public health in the United States is never static. It must be sensitive enough to signal a new health threat. It must be specific enough to pinpoint problems and focus resources. It must be flexible and connected enough to protect people locally, nationally, and globally. That means public health surveillance in the United States must be responsive to change—and so must we.

Over the lifetime of the surveillance strategy, we've stretched our surveillance systems and our workforce to track and contain some of the most complex and deadly public health outbreaks and emergencies in our history, from Ebola and Zika, to the health effects of hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.

In October 2017, HHS declared the opioid overdose crisis a nationwide public health emergency. The health effects from this fast moving epidemic are so great, it has decreased our overall life expectancy as a nation. As leaders in the field of public health, we must work together if we are to turn the tide. One of the most powerful tools we have to understand the problem and target resources is strong surveillance and reliable data.

The progress we make now could mean thousands of lives saved each year. It can also equip us to be even more capable of handling the next health crises that will inevitably come.

To finish what we started and get to a future where data drives action in real time—efficiently, flexibly, rapidly, and with lifesaving impact—we have to keep moving in strategic ways. We need to work within modernized and legacy health IT systems and integrate the workflows of clinicians and public health agencies. We need to better harness information contained in electronic health records and health care information technology systems. And we need to better understand data we already have.

We must get our best ideas out there. We must wrestle with the big decisions. We must strive to do the harder things. Most importantly, we must be ready to embrace the changes that will make us better. When we do, we can truly make a difference in the world of public health.

