

# Whistleblower: US could face virus rebound 'darkest winter'

May 14 2020, by Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar

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In this image provided by Public Health Emergency, a department of Health and Human Services, Rick Bright is shown in his official photo from April 27, 2017, in Washington. America faces the "darkest winter in modern history" unless leaders act decisively to prevent a rebound of the coronavirus, says Bright, a government whistleblower who alleges he was ousted from his job for warning

the Trump administration to prepare for the pandemic. (Health and Human Services via AP)

America faces the "darkest winter in modern history" unless leaders act decisively to prevent a rebound of the coronavirus, says a government whistleblower who alleges he was ousted from his job after warning the Trump administration to prepare for the pandemic.

Immunologist Dr. Rick Bright makes his sobering prediction in testimony prepared for his appearance Thursday before the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Aspects of his complaint about early administration handling of the crisis are expected to be backed up by testimony from an executive of a company that manufactures, respirator masks.

A federal watchdog agency has found "reasonable grounds" that Bright was removed from his post as head of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority after sounding the alarm at the Department of Health and Human Services. Bright alleged he became a target of criticism when he urged early efforts to invest in vaccine development and stock up on supplies.

"Our window of opportunity is closing," Bright says in his prepared testimony posted on the House committee website. "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."

Bright's testimony follows this week's warning by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert, that a rushed lifting of store-closing and stay-at-home restrictions could "turn back the clock,"

seedling more suffering and death and complicating efforts to get the economy rolling again.



A sign on how to keep your family safe during the coronavirus pandemic rests near an entrance to SouthPark Mall, Wednesday, May 13, 2020, in Strongsville, Ohio. Ohio retail businesses reopened Tuesday following a nearly two-month-long shutdown ordered by Gov. Mike DeWine to limit the spread of the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Tony Dejak)

President Donald Trump has dismissed Bright as "a disgruntled guy," and some of the president's political allies have urged that Fauci be fired, although that seems unlikely.

More than 83,000 people have died in the U.S., representing more than one-fourth of global deaths and the world's highest toll. On the planet

more than 4.3 million have been infected and about 295,000 have died.

Eager to restart the economy, Trump has been urging states to lift restrictions, and many governors are doing so gradually, though consumers remain leery of going back to restaurants, social events and sporting competitions.

In his prepared testimony, Bright said, "The undeniable fact is there will be a resurgence of (COVID-19) this fall, greatly compounding the challenges of seasonal influenza and putting an unprecedented strain on our [health care system](#)."



A woman walks with a child at SouthPark Mall, Wednesday, May 13, 2020, in Strongsville, Ohio. Ohio retail businesses reopened Tuesday following a nearly two-month-long shutdown ordered by Gov. Mike DeWine to limit the spread of the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Tony Dejak)

"Without clear planning and implementation of the steps that I and other experts have outlined, 2020 will be darkest winter in modern history," Bright wrote.

Bright, who has a doctoral degree in immunology, outlined a path forward that would be based on science, even as researchers work to develop better treatments and an effective vaccine. The steps include:

— Establishing a national testing strategy. The White House has urged states to take the lead on testing, even as the [federal government](#) pushes to make more tests and better ones widely available. Trump says the U.S. has "prevailed" on testing through this strategy, but in Congress Democrats are demanding a federal framework to encompass the whole nation.

— Doubling down on educating the public about basic safety measures such as frequent hand-washing and wearing masks in public places as guidelines indicate. "Frankly, our leaders must lead by modeling the behavior," said Bright, in a not-too-subtle reference to a president who conspicuously goes maskless.



Shoppers walk past a sign encouraging masks at SouthPark Mall, Wednesday, May 13, 2020, in Strongsville, Ohio. Ohio retail businesses reopened Tuesday following a nearly two-month-long shutdown ordered by Gov. Mike DeWine to limit the spread of the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Tony Dejak)

— Ramping up production of essential equipment and supplies, from cotton swabs for testing to protective gear for health care workers and essential workers.

— Setting up a system to fairly distribute equipment and supplies that are scarce and highly sought. Eliminating state vs. state competition would increase efficiency and reduce costs, he wrote.

As part of his whistleblower complaint, Bright is seeking to be reinstated in his old job. HHS, his employer, says it strongly disagrees with his allegations and that it reassigned him to a high-profile position helping to

lead the development of new [coronavirus](#) tests at the National Institutes of Health.

BARDA, the agency Bright worked at for 10 years, was created to help the government respond to bioterrorism, infectious diseases, and radiological attacks. It focuses on developing and procuring counter-measures such as vaccines and treatments. Prior to his reassignment Bright had received an "outstanding" performance review.



Buses and motor coaches circle past gatherers on the National Mall in Washington, Wednesday, May 13, 2020, as part of a rally to raise awareness of the industry in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

He says friction with HHS leaders escalated after he opposed widespread use of hydroxychloroquine, a malaria drug that Trump touted without proof as a "game-changer" for treating COVID-19 patients. Subsequent studies have indicated the drug may do more harm than good. Bright was summarily removed in late April.

One aspect of Bright's complaint is expected to get backing at Thursday's hearing from an executive of a Texas company that manufactures N95 respirator masks. Michael Bowen, executive vice president of Prestige Ameritech, emailed with Bright repeatedly starting in late January. Bowen offered to crank up production lines that were sitting idle, while warning that the world supply of masks was being snapped up by other countries. Bright said in his complaint that it took five weeks to move the federal bureaucracy.

In written testimony to the committee, Bowen said Bright and other BARDA directors he'd worked with previously all wanted to address a chronic problem of not enough masks in the government stockpile, "but in my opinion didn't have enough authority."

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, America was told that restrictive "governmental 'silos' had been torn down ... so that different federal agencies could work together for national security," Bowen added. "But I didn't see evidence of that."

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