President Biden Proposes New Agency for Medical Breakthroughs

Cancer, diabetes and Alzheimer's would be the initial focus for the proposed agency within the National Institutes of Health.

April 29, 2021 By Bob Barnett

In his first speech before a joint session of Congress on April 28, one day shy of his 100th day in office, President Biden proposed the formation of a new health agency within the National Institutes of Health the aim of which would be to develop breakthroughs in major diseases, including Alzheimer's, diabetes and cancer.

"The Defense Department has an agency called DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, that's there to develop breakthroughs to enhance our national security, which led to the internet and GPS and so much more," said Biden in his speech. "The National Institutes of Health, the NIH, should create a similar Advanced Research Projects Agency for health. To develop breakthroughs—to prevent, detect, and treat diseases like Alzheimer's, diabetes, and cancer."

The semi-independent agency within the National Institutes of Health, dubbed ARPA-H, would have a proposed budget of $6.5 billion dollars and would use different methods than current biomedical research to speed significant breakthroughs. According to the medical news site STAT, that would include "creating project managers with term limits and awarding funding via contract as opposed to grants, effectively building in more aggressive benchmarks for what government-funded research should achieve."

In his speech, Biden explored many other health issues as well. He focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, of course, noting that in his first 100 days, more than 220 million COVID-19 vaccine shots have been administered at nearly 40,000 pharmacies and over 700 community centers. "We're setting up community vaccination sites and are deploying mobile units into hard-to-reach areas. Today, 90% of Americans now live within five miles of a vaccination shot.… So get vaccinated now." Later in the speech, he promised to contribute more widely to global vaccination efforts. "As our own vaccine supply grows to meet our needs—and we are meeting them—we will become an arsenal of vaccines for other countries—just as America was the arsenal of democracy in World War II," he said.

The president also proposed expanding health insurance and cutting drug costs. He noted that an

additional 800,000 Americans have enrolled in the Affordable Care Act in his first 100 days, after he extended a special sign-up period, and mentioned new investments in health care for veterans and "critical investments to address the opioid crisis."

He proposed extending temporary pandemic-related funding for health care to make changes permanent. "Let's lower deductibles for working families on the Affordable Care Act, and let's lower prescription drug costs. We all know how outrageously expensive they are. In fact, we pay the highest prescription drug prices in the world right here in America—nearly three times as much as other countries. We can change that. Let's do what we've always talked about. Let's give Medicare the power to save hundreds of billions of dollars by negotiating lower prices for prescription drugs. That won't just help people on Medicare—it will lower prescription drug costs for everyone."

Many of President Biden's proposals, including establishing ARPA-H, would require new legislation and congressional funding. According to STAT, the idea, first proposed by Biden during his campaign in 2019, has "long enjoyed the backing of prominent scientists, including the genomicist Michael Stebbins and the former DARPA official Geoffrey Ling as well as the Suzanne Wright Foundation, a nonprofit founded by former NBC executive Bob Wright, himself a longtime ally of former President Trump." Broad bipartisan support may make the establishment of ARPA-H more likely.

Biden has a long history of supporting cancer research. Vice President Kamala Harris also has strong connections to cancer research. And First Lady Jill Biden is taking a lead in his administration's cancer efforts.

In proposing ARPA-H, sometimes referred to as HARPA, President Biden, who lost his son Beau Biden to brain cancer in 2015, added, "This is personal to so many of us. I can think of no more worthy investment. And I know of nothing that is more bipartisan. Let's end cancer as we know it. It's within our power."

To learn more, see "Watch Jill Biden Talk Cancer and COVID-19 at an HIV and LGBTQ Clinic."

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