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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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17.01.2022

US government moves to end daily COVID-19 death reporting by hospitals

The US federal government will no longer require hospitals to report the number of people who die from COVID-19 every day, according to new guidelines from the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

On January 6, the HHS published updated guidelines on which information hospitals provide to the agency. The guidelines note the “retirement of fields which are no longer required to be reported,” among which is “Previous day’s COVID-19 deaths.”

The guidelines note, “This field has been made inactive for the federal data collection. Hospitals no longer need to report these data elements to the federal government.” This change goes into effect February 2.



President Joe Biden speaks at the White House. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

The move by the Biden administration to weaken the reporting of COVID-19 deaths has direct precedents in the Trump administration. The House COVID Subcommittee's 2021 year-end report said "Trump Administration officials purposefully weakened CDC's coronavirus testing guidance in August 2020 to obscure how rapidly the virus was spreading across the country."

- Data Elements Made Inactive for the Federal Data Collection⁵:
 - 2a: All Hospital Beds
 - 2b: All Adult Hospital Beds
 - 7: Total Mechanical Ventilators
 - 8: Ventilators in Use
 - 14: ED Overflow
 - 15: ED Overflow and Ventilated
 - 16: Previous Day's COVID-19 Deaths
 - 21: Previous Day's Remdesivir Used
 - 22: Current Inventory Remdesivir

A document issued Jan 6 by the US Health and Human Services tells hospitals they are no longer required to report daily COVID-19 deaths to the federal government starting Feb 2.

Although the new HHS guidelines were issued on January 6, they were not made known until publicized by Dr. Jorge A. Caballero, a medical doctor and Clinical Instructor at Stanford university, on Twitter.

On Friday afternoon, Dr. Caballero wrote, "I'd love to understand why the federal government will no longer require hospitals to report the daily number of #COVID19 deaths as of February 2nd"

Caballero retweeted a response by this reporter noting that the same day the HHS published the updated guidance, Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, a former Biden administration COVID-19 advisor and advocate of eugenics, published an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) calling on governments to "retire" the reporting of deaths from COVID-19.

Emanuel's call for a "new normal" was hailed with an editorial in the *Washington Post* and a lead interview on NBC's Meet the Press, the most prominent of the US Sunday talk-shows.

Although hospitals will still report to state health authorities, and via the states to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), many states, led by Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, are themselves moving to shut down daily COVID-19 reporting, or have already done so.

The CDC has been in discussions with the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists about a directive that "would direct states to limit daily case reporting," according to a report published December 30 in the *New York Times*.

States led by far-right Republicans are already slashing testing and reporting.

Tennessee, run by the far-right governor Bill Lee, who refused to recognize the election of US president Joe Biden, has already stopped daily case reporting, switching to a once-per-week system of reporting tests.

Florida Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo said last month that the state intended to "unwind" the "testing mentality." Ladapo reports to DeSantis, a right-wing ideologue who also refused to acknowledge the outcome of the 2020 election.

Even more states plan to end daily reporting of cases, with many "that are still doing daily reporting eager to make the shift in the coming months," Marcelle Layton, chief medical officer at the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, told the *Times*.

After WSWS reporters verified that Caballero was correctly summarizing the HHS guidance, our report summarizing his findings was shared more than 6,000 times and viewed by more than two million people on Twitter.

Commenters responded with outrage. "The US government doesn't want us to know how many of us are dying," wrote Chris Richards, in a comment that received 1,500 likes. Thousands of commenters voiced their outrage that, after promising to "follow the science," the Biden administration has taken an action that smacks of the Trump administration's efforts to cover up the pandemic.

The day before, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki was asked, as “the virus is setting records for infection,” whether “things need to change.” Psaki replied, “We could certainly propose legislation to see if people support bunny rabbits and ice cream, but that wouldn’t be very rewarding for the American people,” prompting widespread outrage at the Biden administration’s indifference to mass death.

Responding to Caballero’s tweet, Sarah Lovenheim, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at the US Department of Health And Human services, replied, “COVID mortality data remains publicly accessible. The data remains publicly accessible here and as there is new analysis, it becomes publicly available, too,” linking to data from the CDC compiled from state reporting.

To this, Dr. Caballero replied, “There’s no other source of daily in-hospital #COVID19 deaths at the state/national level. All other data sources are derivatives of *this* specific field. This field is *not* found in any other publicly available dataset. This field is used to estimate total COVID deaths + more.”

Responding to the claims by Dr. Caballero and the WSWS, Erin Kissane, a journalist at the *Atlantic* and co-founder of the COVID Tracking Project, which shut down on March 7 last year, replied “hospitals no longer reporting covid deaths to daily HHS doesn’t mean that all covid deaths don’t have to be reported to local/state health authorities, who report them to CDC. We’re still counting deaths.”

Likewise BNO Newsroom tweeted, “Contrary to some tweets, the U.S. is not ending daily reporting on deaths from COVID-19. Health departments will continue to provide updates as usual.” BNO confirmed to this journalist that it was replying to our tweet, but gave no further clarification in response to our inquiries.

Replying to these and other claims, Caballero wrote, “I, for one, care to have a secondary data source that can be used to double-check #COVID19 deaths reported by states with a 20-month track record of unscrupulous policies and questionable data management.”

Regardless of the claims by Kissane and BNO, the reporting by Caballero and the WSWS stands. On February 2, hospitals will no longer be required to report COVID-19 deaths

directly to the federal government, and such data will depend on state governments that are themselves moving to shut down reporting.

There is no public health justification for the limiting of data reporting in the midst of a raging pandemic which is currently setting records for infections and hospitalizations. Just like under Trump, the efforts by the federal and state governments to limit reporting on COVID-19 is driven by a political effort to cover up mass infection and death.

World Socialist 15.01.2022