

Sudden Departure Of White House Global Health Security Head Has Experts Worried

By Lauren Weber

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Rear Adm. Tim Ziemer is among the departures since John Bolton became head of the National Security Council.



MOSES ROBINSON VIA GETTY IMAGES

Rear Adm. Tim Ziemer attends a conference in Atlanta in 2011. He is leaving his National Security Council position as senior director for global health security and biothreats.

Rear Adm. Tim Ziemer, the head of global health security on the White House's National Security Council, left the [Trump administration](#) on Tuesday. The news was announced one day after an [Ebola outbreak](#) was declared in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The departure comes amid a reshuffling of the NSC under newly named national security adviser John Bolton, which includes a change in organizational structure that eliminates the office Ziemer led. Ziemer's staff has been placed under other NSC departments.

Ziemer, who had been described as "[one of the most quietly effective leaders in public health](#)," was widely lauded in the global health community for his work on the President's Malaria Initiative, which helped save [6 million lives](#), before joining this administration.

“Admiral Ziemer’s departure is deeply alarming, especially when the administration is actively working to [cut funds](#) that addressed past pandemics like Ebola,” Rep. Ami Bera (D-Calif.), the vice ranking member of the foreign affairs committee, told HuffPost in a statement. “Expertise like his is critical in avoiding large outbreaks.”

According to Robert Palladino, NSC spokesman, the reorganization will streamline the process, and he said Ziemer left “on the warmest of terms.”

Ziemer’s exit follows the [departure](#) last month of White House homeland security adviser Tom Bossert, who was another [champion of investment](#) in global health security. Bossert left the day after Bolton began as national security adviser.

Ron Klain, the former Ebola “czar” under President Barack Obama, told HuffPost the combination of their departures was a blow to global health security.

“Proposing a rescission of [Ebola contingency funds](#) on the very day that a new Ebola outbreak is announced is badly misguided; forcing out the two top officials in charge of epidemic response at the White House – Tom Bossert and Tim Ziemer – is even worse,” Klain said. “Doing it all at the same time shows a reckless disregard for the dangers we face.”

Some global health security experts also aren’t so sure about whether the reorganization will maintain global health security and biothreats — such as potential pandemics like Ebola — as a priority.

Beth Cameron, who previously served as the senior director for global health security and biodefense on [Obama](#)’s NSC staff and is currently the Nuclear Threat Initiative’s vice president for global biological policy and programs, called his departure “a major loss for health security, biodefense, and pandemic preparedness.”

“It is unclear in his absence who at the White House would be in charge of a pandemic,” Cameron said, calling it “a situation that should be immediately rectified.”
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Tim Rieser, a staffer for the Senate Appropriations committee and senior foreign policy aide for Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), who has been called one of the “[most powerful staffers](#) in Congress presiding over U.S. foreign policy and U.S. foreign assistance,” echoed Cameron’s comments.

“We have no idea at this point who at the White House is in charge of global health security, at a time when infectious diseases can spread like wildfire in a matter of days threatening millions of Americans here and abroad,” Rieser said.

Loyce Pace, the president and executive director of the Global Health Council, a membership organization that lobbies for global health priorities, reiterated the need to know who is leading pandemic response.

“We really need a strong leader in place from the U.S. who will help coordinate an interagency response and can really provide that kind of assurance and contribute to the progress made in global health security,” Pace said.

The development is also troubling some global health leaders, as it points to a larger pattern within the White House not to put adequate resources behind global health preparedness, said Jeremy Konyndyk, a senior policy fellow for the Center for Global Development. Konyndyk previously led parts of the 2014 Ebola response for the Obama administration as the director of USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance.

Konyndyk cited President [Donald Trump](#)’s recent proposal to [rescind unspent funds that had targeted Ebola](#), as well as the administration’s “failure to seek sustained funding for some of the global health security investments that began under the last administration.”

While advocates were happy to see that Congress almost [doubled global health security funding](#) for the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for the 2018 fiscal year, Trump’s stance has been to call for cuts to overall global health aid. Previous versions of the president’s budgets have called for spending reductions at the [CDC](#), [USAID](#) and the [Global Fund](#).

Rieser also pointed to the White House’s choice not to push for more funding in this arena, saying bipartisan support has meant Congress has appropriated “significantly larger amounts than the White House has requested to help less developed countries improve their capabilities to conduct surveillance and respond quickly to disease outbreaks.”

When asked about the proposed rescission of the Ebola funds, a spokesperson for the NSC told HuffPost that sufficient funds were available through USAID for an outbreak and that if additional funds were needed, the State Department could appropriate them through funding for other programs.

The spokesperson also stated that in such a situation, other donor countries would be expected to contribute, including by supporting the World Health Organization’s Contingency Fund for Emergencies.

Ultimately for Konyndyk, the change in structure at the NSC could be an “unraveling of some capabilities and resource streams that date back across two administrations and have pretty bipartisan support on the Hill.”

“I hope it’s not lost on anyone that it happened the exact week that we have new reports on the Ebola outbreak,” Konyndyk added.