



Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention (CDC)
Atlanta GA 30329-4027

April 7, 2026

Benjamin Chevat
9/11 Health Watch, Inc.
c/o New York State AFL-CIO
100 South Swan Street
Albany, New York 12210

Dear Mr. Chevat:

Thank you for your letter to Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., regarding the World Trade Center (WTC) Health Program hiring freeze, staffing, and other administrative issues. I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Secretary.

HHS's commitment to the WTC Health Program remains steadfast, and we will continue working to uphold the bipartisan commitments made to support those affected by the events of September 11, 2001.

Please see the enclosure for responses to the issues raised in your letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jay Bhattacharya".

Jay Bhattacharya , MD, PhD
Senior Official Carrying out the Delegable Duties
of the CDC Director

Enclosure

World Trade Center Health Program Responses

1. Hiring Freeze and Staffing

On January 20, 2025, the President issued a Presidential Memorandum freezing federal civilian hiring. The freeze was renewed in April and again in July. However, in October 2025, the hiring freeze ended, and new hiring processes are now being established. The WTC Health Program is seeking to ensure staffing is at sufficient capacity by pursuing all allowable methods to prioritize and fill vacant positions.

2. Research Awards

The WTC Health Program administers research grants in coordination with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Office of Extramural Coordination & Special Projects (OECSP). OECSP was subject to the April 1, 2025, Reduction in Force notices, but those notices were rescinded on January 13, 2026, and some OECSP staff have since returned. Between April 1, 2025, and January 13, 2026, staff in OECSP were approved to return from administrative leave to process WTC Health Program research grant actions, ensuring the statutorily required research activities continued. In collaboration with NIOSH, the WTC Health Program issued over 30 extensions for previously awarded research projects and awarded 16 newly funded research projects in fiscal year 2025.

In December 2025, the WTC Health Program and OECSP published a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) to extend the WTC Health Registry. This NOFO is open until February 20, 2026, and is available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/360555>. In addition, the WTC Health Program posted three NOFO forecasts to alert applicants of future planned funding opportunities for research that addresses critical knowledge gaps, improve the treatment and well-being of responders and survivors affected by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and develop and implement effective strategies to identify, recruit, and retain eligible participants in the Youth Research Cohort using Community Engaged Research principles. These three forecasts are:

- Cooperative Research Agreements Related to the World Trade Center Health Program (U01). This forecast is available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/356163>.
- Exploratory/Developmental Grants Related to the World Trade Center Health Program (R21). This forecast is available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/360753>.
- Promoting World Trade Center Health Program Youth Research Cohort Recruitment and Retention Using Principles of Community Engaged Research to Build Community Participation (U01). This forecast is available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/360752>.

3. Petitions

All petitions requesting the addition of non-cancer health conditions to the List of WTC-Related Health Conditions continue to be processed as outlined in the Program's *Policy and Procedures*

for Adding Non-Cancer Conditions to the List of WTC-Related Health Conditions available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/wtc/policies.html>. The Program received the cardiovascular and autoimmune petitions referenced in your letter in September 2023; the cognitive impairment petition was not received until February 2025. Since the end of 2024, the WTC Health Program has lost several key scientific staff members, which has slowed petition processing. After completion of all science, policy, and procedural steps, including the scientific literature review, the scientific evaluation, and clearance, I, as Administrator of the WTC Health Program, will publish my determination whether to add the petitioned health conditions in the *Federal Register*.

4. Steering Committee Meetings

On January 21, 2025, HHS issued a pause on external communications and public appearances that were not directly related to emergencies or critical to preserving health. This was a temporary pause to allow the new Administration to develop a process for reviewing and approving certain documents, including communications. As a result of the pause and new processes, the WTC Health Program federal staff and contractors were temporarily unable to attend the Responder and Survivor Steering Committee meetings. While the Program has historically attended the Steering Committee meetings for both responders and survivors, the Program and its staff are not members of either Committee. The Steering Committees are managed by external stakeholders who are independent from the WTC Health Program. Steering Committees appoint their own members and set the frequency of the meetings. As such, the Steering Committees can hold these meetings at their discretion and without the participation of the Program. WTC Health Program staff attended both the Responder and Survivor Steering Committee meetings in November 2025 and February 2026 and plan to attend both Committees' meetings quarterly going forward.

In addition to Program staff attending both Steering Committees' quarterly meetings, Program leadership meets periodically with the Committees' co-chairs and communicates regularly via email to provide Program updates and respond to inquiries.