

# Guns vs. Stethoscopes

**When it comes to the sequester, all eyes are on defense. But health spending is certain to take a hit, and some groups are fighting back.**

By Meghan McCarthy

July 17, 2012 | 9:30 p.m.

When most politicians talk about the looming sequestration cuts threatening American lives, they aren't referring to health care cuts.

The buzz around the sequester, which will cut \$54.7 billion each from defense and nondefense programs, has focused on the impact that the budget-slashing will have on the military. Former Vice President Dick Cheney marched up to Hill on Tuesday to drum up support for avoiding defense cuts at all costs.

But when it comes to the health care cuts, loud defenders from either side of the aisle are not to be found. Karl Moeller, the executive director of the Campaign for Public Health Foundation, knows that all too well. Moeller points to past budget cuts over the past few years as examples of what is to come if the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other public-health programs see an 8.4 percent drop in their budgets from sequestration.

Take for example, an April letter from the CDC to the Florida Department of Health, warning of the worst tuberculosis outbreaks the agency had seen in 20 years, "both in terms of size and rapid growth."

The letter arrived a few days after Republican Gov. Rick Scott of Florida signed a budget bill that slashed funding for the state's public-health agency and ordered a state hospital that specialized in treating tuberculosis to close.

Now, three months later, tuberculosis has claimed 13 lives in the state and infected 99 people, according to the Palm Beach Post. CDC personnel have been sent to Florida to assist in containing the outbreak, and the agency is reviewing a request from the state for supplemental federal funds to "address programmatic gaps."

Moeller has been cataloguing outbreaks like Florida's on his foundation's blog; 18 states also have seen record levels of whooping cough this year.

"The thing about public health is that these outbreaks happen in stages," Moeller said in an interview. "These stories are just starting to come out, now that CDC has been pushed back to 2001 funding levels already. Throw in another \$500 million in cuts [from the sequester], and you are going to see more of these stories."

But Moeller believes that tales of spreading infection, which often hits homeless or low-income people first, still won't be enough to get his group's message across to Congress. To do that, the Campaign for Public Health Foundation is relying on the one thing on top of voters' minds: jobs and the economy.

Moeller's group hopes to take 30 business executives on a tour of the CDC to get them interested in what the agency is up to.

“If you see more sick people not showing up for work ... let’s go tour the CDC to learn about what they’re doing that impacts business, the health of your workforce,” Moeller said.

His isn’t the only group lobbying on how cuts in health funding will negatively impact the economy. United for Medical Research is an umbrella organization representing businesses, patient-advocacy groups, and research institutions that lobbies for increased funding for the National Institutes of Health.

UMR President Carrie Wolinetz says the group is trying to “sound the drumbeat” on the effects that sequester cuts will have. The Department of Health and Human Services recently estimated that the sequester could eliminate 2,300 NIH grants, about 5 percent of the total grants that the institute awards. UMR did its own study and estimates that 33,704 jobs could be lost if NIH funding gets trimmed under the sequester.

“They are hearing a lot from the folks on the defense side; we are trying to increase the volume on nondefense side,” Wolinetz said in an interview. To up that volume, Wolinetz said the group recently flew CEOs to Washington to meet with congressional leadership and appropriators.

“They talked about how the uncertainty of the looming sequester was causing a tremendous number of problems for our industry partners to plan effectively,” Wolinetz said. “They need to have a feeling about what the situation will be in terms of their own strategic planning.”

The House Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee is slated on Wednesday to mark up its fiscal 2013 bill, which would make even deeper cuts to health agencies. While the bill isn’t likely to make it to the House floor, it lays out a negotiating marker for House Republicans to take to the Senate when both chambers are ready to negotiate federal funding. Their message, so far, is loud and clear: Sequester or not, health programs are getting cut.

*This article appears in the July 18, 2012, edition of National Journal Daily.*