

# Becerra's Failed Leadership on Covid

---

## Summary

Multiple news reports, administration officials and health experts have assessed Becerra's leadership in the Biden administration as passive and disconnected from the administration's pandemic strategy, leading to coordination gaps, public confusion, and missed opportunities for a stronger response. When he was active, he obstructed progress and conveyed a lack of understanding of health issues, according to those sources:

- **White House Officials “So Frustrated” with Becerra’s Performance, Biden Considered Replacing Him**
  - In January 2022, *The Washington Post* reported, “White House officials have grown so frustrated with top health official Xavier Becerra as the pandemic rages on that they have openly mused about who might be better in the job, although political considerations have stopped them from taking steps to replace him, officials involved in the discussions said.” (*The Washington Post*, “White House frustrations grow over health chief Becerra’s handling of pandemic,” [January 31, 2022](#))
  - The *Post*, citing “senior administration officials” and outside advisers, reported that top officials’ “dissatisfaction has escalated in recent months” amidst the fifth pandemic wave, “health messaging missteps,” and “controversial policies about coronavirus testing and isolation.” (*The Washington Post*, “White House frustrations grow over health chief Becerra’s handling of pandemic,” [January 31, 2022](#))
- **New York Times: Becerra a “Ghost” during COVID Crisis**
  - Becerra faced sharp criticism for his notably passive and largely invisible role during the Biden administration’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite leading the nation’s largest health agency during a once-in-a-generation pandemic, Becerra was described by one leading health expert as “a ghost.”
  - Dr. Eric Topol, founder of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, stated: “He’s like, a ghost. Oh, is there a pandemic? Oh, really? Oh, there’s infighting among my agencies. Oh, really? He’s done nothing.”
  - Becerra’s absence became a recurring theme in critiques of the administration’s COVID strategy. (*The New York Times*, “One Year In, Biden’s Health Secretary Seeks a Reboot,” [March 19, 2022](#))
- **NBC News: Becerra Seemed “Invisible” During Pandemic Criticism from Health Experts:** “Conversations with six former senior health policy officials from both Democratic and Republican administrations, as well as three people closely familiar with the agency’s activities, reveal that they are mystified about why Becerra’s leadership has been, as several of them put it, ‘invisible.’ (*NBC News*, “The very low public profile of Biden’s health secretary,” [December 10, 2021](#))

- **Marginal Role in Administration:** Becerra was “not in the room” when major Covid policies were decided and “rarely spotted” at the White House. “The White House really paid no attention to him,” said a senior Biden official. He “wasn’t a major figure in the Biden administration’s Covid-19 response,” according to the health news outlet *STAT*.
- **Becerra Obstructed White House Covid Response:** Becerra clashed with Susan Rice and angered President Biden with his reluctance to take custody of unaccompanied migrant children.

**Major Critics of Becerra’s covid response from White House/Public Health Experts who called Becerra an “idiot” and that his failures “led to preventable hospitalizations and deaths”:**

- **Susan Rice**, Director of Domestic Policy Council, 2021-2023. **Confronted** Becerra over his refusal to take more child migrants into HHS care; **reportedly called him a “bitch-ass” and an “idiot.”**
- **Lawrence O. Gostin**, public health law professor at Georgetown University. Called Becerra a “**major disappointment**” in his public profile as HHS secretary and was “very silent” during Covid
- **Eric Topol**, Scripps Research Translational Institute director. Wrote an **editorial** in *Science* magazine accusing Becerra of refusing to track Covid hospitalizations and deaths among the vaccinated and having “also shirked other responsibilities” including providing a consistent public message on vaccines. His “inaction is unacceptable,” he wrote, adding that the delay in recommending universal booster shots **“led to preventable hospitalizations and deaths.”**
- **Failure During Key Decisions:** According to the book *The Last Politician*, Becerra stood by as the CDC abruptly reversed mask guidance, jolting Americans and risking a “public health nightmare.”
- **Marginal Role in Administration:** Becerra was “not in the room” when major Covid policies were decided and “rarely spotted” at the White House. “The White House really paid no attention to him,” said a senior Biden official. He “wasn’t a major figure in the Biden administration’s Covid-19 response,” according to the health news outlet *STAT*.
- **Obstructed White House Covid Response:** Becerra clashed with Susan Rice and angered President Biden with his reluctance to take custody of unaccompanied migrant children. He opposed or delayed White House proposals to incentivize doctors to promote vaccinations, frustrating officials who said he still “thinks like a congressman or attorney general.”

## **Becerra Inconsistent and Confusing Health Messaging During Covid: “Embarrassed” White House by Failing to Coordinate**

Officials criticized Becerra for inconsistent and sometimes conflicting communications from health agencies that confused the public. The *Post* reported:

“When the CDC announced in December, for instance, that it was halving the isolation and quarantine times for those infected with or exposed to the virus without requiring a negative test, Walensky, Fauci and Murthy voiced conflicting messages about the new guidance in public interviews. White House officials were embarrassed by the rollout, which invited fierce public blowback, and thought Becerra or one of his staffers should have coordinated those messages ahead of time, according to two senior administration officials. Becerra ‘is all their bosses. And could coordinate them. But he doesn’t,’ said a person involved in the covid response.” (*Washington Post*, “White House frustrations grow over health chief Becerra’s handling of pandemic,” [January 31, 2022](#))

## **Becerra Criticized for Failing During Crisis: “He’s Not Doing It’**

Sources said Becerra had taken a passive role in crisis management, failing to offer input or ask probing questions of officials during briefings from health officials on work related to the pandemic. (*The Washington Post*, “White House frustrations grow over health chief Becerra’s handling of pandemic,” [January 31, 2022](#))

“The battles and challenges between the agencies need to be reconciled, and he’s not doing it,” said one outside adviser. “He has a \$1.5 trillion budget. He has FDA, NIH, CDC. All of those agencies need help, and they certainly need to be rebuilding, and none of that is happening.” (*The Washington Post*, “White House frustrations grow over health chief Becerra’s handling of pandemic,” [January 31, 2022](#))

## **“No Evidence” That Becerra Used His Power and Authority to Help Americans During Pandemic: “He Hasn’t Shown Up”**

“He hasn’t shown up,” Topol said of Becerra. “An HHS secretary has so much authority and power to help. And we have no evidence that any of it is being exerted.” (*The Washington Post*, “White House frustrations grow over health chief Becerra’s handling of pandemic,” [January 31, 2022](#))

Despite leading a \$2.1 trillion agency, Becerra remained largely out of the spotlight in 2021. Becerra’s absence became a recurring theme in critiques of the administration’s COVID strategy. Several administration officials told *The New York Times* that Becerra played a limited role in setting pandemic policy and failed to resolve disputes between the CDC, FDA, and NIH—all agencies under his department’s oversight. (*The New York Times*, “One Year In, Biden’s Health Secretary Seeks a Reboot,” [March 19, 2022](#))

## Journalists Called on Becerra to “Come Out of Hiding” as He Refused to Hold Open Press Briefings Like His Predecessor

In November 2021, the Association of Health Care Journalists sent a letter to Becerra urging him to hold a press conference, which had yet to do as health secretary.

“AHCJ is calling on Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra to make himself available for questioning by reporters. In a letter to Becerra sent Friday, the association urges regular, open press briefings similar to those held by his predecessor.

“In his seven months in office, the leader of one of the largest federal departments has kept a low profile, even though the agencies he oversees, which include the CDC, the FDA, the NIH, and Medicare, make decisions affecting the lives of virtually all Americans.

“It’s time for Secretary Becerra to come out of hiding,’ said AHCJ President Felice J. Freyer, who signed the letter along with fellow board members Sabriya Rice and Joyce Frieden. ‘The public deserves to hear from the cabinet member responsible for the programs and policies that affect our health.’” (*Association of Health Care Journalists*, “Becerra needs to open up to the press,” [November 29, 2021](#))

### Criticized for Seeming “Invisible” During Pandemic

According to NBC:

“Conversations with six former senior health policy officials from both Democratic and Republican administrations, as well as three people closely familiar with the agency’s activities, reveal that they are mystified about why Becerra’s leadership has been, as several of them put it, ‘invisible.’

“A senior health official in the Obama administration who did not want to be named said, ‘The fact that he is not visible is very striking,’ saying the public health community has faced unprecedented challenges this year and that the agency, which has 80,000 employees, could benefit from a larger public profile.

“Another top Obama health policy official said Becerra’s low profile was ‘quite strange’ and a ‘lost opportunity to communicate with the Hispanic community.’ The official recalled that previous HHS secretaries Kathleen Sebelius and Sylvia Burwell maintained much higher profiles during the H1N1 flu and Ebola outbreaks, respectively, saying, ‘They were out there all the time.’

## **“Not a Major Figure” in Covid Response; “The White House Really Paid No Attention to Him”**

According to *STAT*, Becerra “had a stumbling start with the White House” marked by a confrontation with Susan Rice, followed by “a quick fade into the background,” as he “wasn’t a major figure in the Biden administration’s Covid-19 response” and didn’t appear at a White House press briefing until a full year into his tenure. “The White House really paid no attention to him,” said a former senior Biden official:

“Almost immediately, Becerra had a stumbling start with the White House.

“Within weeks of his confirmation, he landed in a tete-a-tete with White House Domestic Policy Adviser Susan Rice.

“Becerra seemed to fade into the background from there, three sources said. He wasn’t a major figure in the Biden administration’s Covid-19 response, yielding frequently to top infectious disease official Anthony Fauci, then-Covid-19 coordinator Jeff Zients and then-Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky.

“His first appearance at a White House press briefing was a full year into his tenure — so late, compared to other cabinet secretaries, that reporters were asking when they might see him there.

“‘The White House really paid no attention to him,’ for the first two years, said a former senior Biden official.” (*STAT*, “HHS’s Xavier Becerra, once an ‘invisible’ secretary, is racing to cement a clearer legacy,” [January 9, 2024](#))

Becerra “was not in the room with White House officials shaping the president’s signature policies, multiple people familiar with the dynamic said.” Becerra said he viewed his role as “doing what the president asked. The White House gets to propose, it’s our job at HHS to execute.” (*STAT*, “HHS’s Xavier Becerra, once an ‘invisible’ secretary, is racing to cement a clearer legacy,” [January 9, 2024](#))

## **“A Major Disappointment” as HHS Secretary Who Was “Silent” During Pandemic and Other Crises and Lacked Grasp of Issues**

*STAT* reported in January 2024 that Becerra was “so far removed from the White House sphere of influence that he’s rarely spotted there, even at health care events” and had “not been publicly identified with many of the president’s health care accomplishments.” His lack of a clear legacy was “confounding” to many who had followed his career, but “several current and former” officials – including many Democrats - acknowledged “it was hard to

point to any obvious wins” for Becerra. (STAT, “HHS’s Xavier Becerra, once an ‘invisible’ secretary, is racing to cement a clearer legacy,” [January 9, 2024](#))

“Certainly from a public profile point of view he’s been a major disappointment,” said Lawrence Gostin, a public health law professor at Georgetown University. “He’s a very prominent Latino leader, and he was well placed to really shine during Covid, monkeypox, and other health crises. He was very silent during those crises and when he did speak, he didn’t seem to have a good, enormous grasp of the medical and scientific and public health issues.” (STAT, “HHS’s Xavier Becerra, once an ‘invisible’ secretary,” [January 9, 2024](#))

## **“Shirked ... Responsibilities” Including Providing Guidance That Would Have Prevented Covid Hospitalizations and Deaths**

In 2022, prominent Covid analyst Eric Topol wrote an editorial in *Science* magazine accusing Becerra of refusing to track Covid hospitalizations and deaths among the vaccinated and having “also shirked other responsibilities” including providing a consistent public message on vaccines. His “inaction is unacceptable,” he wrote, adding that the delay in recommending universal booster shots “led to preventable hospitalizations and deaths.” (*Science*, “It’s not too late,” [January 18, 2022](#))

He wrote:

“In May 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared that there would be close tracking of all hospitalizations and deaths among the vaccinated. That never happened, though not because of the CDC.

“The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), led by Secretary Xavier Becerra, has chosen to avoid mandating that data be collected. Is this unwillingness a reaction to fear of political backlash? Amid an ongoing public health crisis, this inaction is unacceptable.

“Mr. Becerra has also shirked other responsibilities. There has been obvious in-fighting between the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the CDC, and the White House COVID-19 Response Team about issues ranging from booster shot recommendations to isolation guidelines that omit any testing for the virus. A leader of HHS should be mediating such conflicts, with the goal of a single, consistent, and unified public message. That, along with data that justify government decisions, would promote clarity and trust.” (*Science*, “It’s not too late,” [January 18, 2022](#))

Topol wrote that, under Becerra, health officials released conflicting guidance on who should get booster shots and when they should get them. “Is it any wonder that only 23%

of Americans have received a booster – in contrast to more than 50% of people in many other countries,” he asked. “[I]t took until late November for the CDC to announce that all vaccinated adults should get a booster shot. This inevitably led to preventable hospitalizations and deaths,” he wrote. (*Science*, “It’s not too late,” [January 18, 2022](#))

### “Tried to Avoid” Responsibility of Taking on Custody of Child Migrants; His “Passive Aggression” Irritated White House

According to the book *The Last Politician* by Franklin Foer, Becerra attempted to block administration plans to expand the transfer unaccompanied child migrants from Border Patrol to HHS, sparking a confrontation with Susan Rice and angering President Biden:

“As the former attorney general of California, he had ample experience with immigration, enough to know that it’s the most thankless policy portfolio of them all.

“On a phone call with more than two dozen White House officials, Susan Rice, the head of the Domestic Policy Council, insisted that Becerra’s department expand the number of children in its custody. But Becerra objected.

“Rice tried to persuade Becerra. Transferring more children to HHS might not be ideal, but it was better than keeping them in overcrowded Border Patrol facilities, where they were living off Doritos; in the moments of anxiety and sadness, kids were consoled by officers carrying guns.

“‘I’ll do it if I get a request from the president in writing,’ he finally volunteered.

“His passive aggression irritated Rice. ‘You won’t get a request in writing. That’s not how the president of the United States operates. He’s given you an order.’

“‘I wasn’t there for it,’ Becerra responded. “‘The rest of us were,’ Rice told him. ‘You need to deliver.’

“Later that week, in the course of preparing for a meeting with Becerra and other advisers working on the issue, Biden heard about the call, and it put him in a foul mood. ‘Who am I going to fire in this meeting?’ he said. Biden felt as if he needed to make it unambiguously clear to Becerra that he needed to take more children into the department’s custody.

“Still, Becerra seemed to only grudgingly accept his responsibilities. ‘I will do what’s requested of me,’ he told the president.

“Kamala Harris told him, ‘It’s good of you to do your job.’” (*The Last Politician*, Franklin Foer, Penguin Press, September 5, 2023)

## White House Officials “Incensed” by Becerra’s Opposition to Initiative to Get More Americans Vaccinated

According to the *Washington Post*, Becerra stalled a Biden administration plan to pay some doctors more if they encouraged their patients to get vaccinated, angering officials:

“In the spring, for instance, as administration officials searched for ways to encourage more Americans to get vaccinated, they coalesced around a plan to pay some doctors more if they encouraged their patients to get the shots. The proposal would have paid doctors through the government health insurance programs Medicare and Medicaid, which fall under HHS and collectively cover more than 100 million people.

“Some White House and HHS officials were incensed by Becerra’s opposition to the proposal, which drew on evidence that Americans were skeptical of politicians’ recommendations on vaccines but trusted the advice of their physicians. (*The Washington Post*, “White House frustrations grow over health chief Becerra’s handling of pandemic,” [January 31, 2022](#))