

A quarter of Montezuma County public health emergency response money sits in federal limbo

County's allotment of remaining 25% sits in larger pool under restricted status by the CDC; EPR seeks to scale back lower priority programs

By Benjamin Rubin Journal Staff Writer

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Montezuma County Public Health Dept. office in Cortez. (Benjamin Rubin/The Journal)



A little-known branch of Montezuma County's Public Health Department moves into the next year with a quarter of its budget restricted by the federal government. Getting a hold of that funding, provided in past years, remains uncertain. Food handled hygienically in restaurants, seat belts worn behind the wheel, available vaccines – the county Public Health Department works toward each of these. But when it comes to safeguarding public health, expect the unexpected, and that's where Emergency Preparedness and Response enters.

EPR helps the county be ready in the case of a major threat to the community's health, whether that be keeping hospitals open in the midst of a disaster or dealing with tainted drinking water. When disorder erupts, EPR makes sure the health department isn't blindsided.

EPR now stands to get only 75% of its funds from previous years because of changes in federal oversight from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As a result, the County has to adjust how it buffers against possible escalating threats by trimming down some parts of the office.

"Even at reduced funding levels, EPR remains critical to public health and safety – especially in rural communities where local capacity is limited," county EPR manager Trent Woods told *The Journal* in an email.

Woods said his office would keep advocating for full funding and stay committed to EPR's core mission.

For the year ahead, the office will likely make some changes, namely by prioritizing some programs and setting aside others, Woods said.

The amount awarded for now is just over \$40,589, said Bobbi Lock, director of county Public Health, during a meeting of the Board of County Commissioners on July 28.



Montezuma County Emergency Preparedness and Response Manager Trent Woods speaks before the Montezuma County Board of County Commissioners on July 28, 2025. (Montezuma County)



Examples Woods gave of essential priorities included “emergency planning with schools” and “public messaging during wildfires.”

Woods said that EPR may have to “pause or scale back lower-priority initiatives, like certain training events, coalition meetings, or community outreach campaigns.”

Officials may take on dual roles, while the county might collaborate with other jurisdictions to share resources, Woods said.

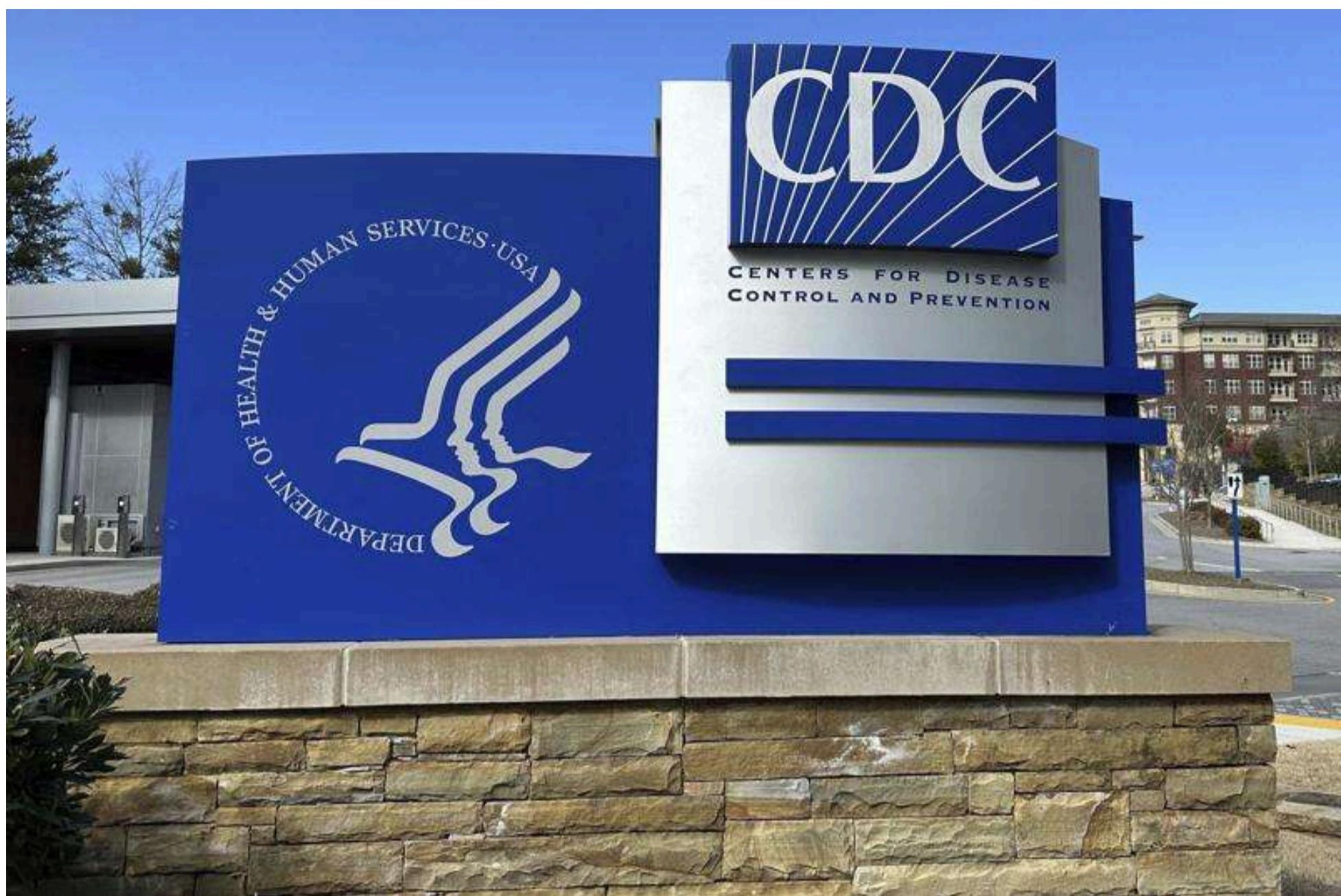
Upstream changes put money on hold for county

The explanation lies in a state-to-federal funding chain: EPR gets money from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, which in turn receives money through a federal program called the Public Health Emergency Preparedness Cooperative Agreement.

Higher up, that federal agreement is distributed by the CDC. At the Georgia-based public health agency, overhauls are underway. Although they don’t entirely explain the funding cuts experienced by Montezuma County, major changes at the CDC have become the norm.

The administration of President Donald Trump has laid off hundreds of employees and slashed more than a dozen data-gathering programs, for instance. Billions more dollars of the CDC’s funding could be subject to further proposed cuts.

Woods said that in the case of emergency public health money, federal oversight requirements for states have changed. States have been made to redo their applications to the CDC, he said.



A sign stands at an entrance to the main campus of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, on Feb. 14. (Jeff Amy/The Associated Press)



“Until these are reviewed and approved by the federal Grant Management system, that last portion of funding is in limbo,” he said.

Woods also said that “federal uncertainty is not uncommon in public health grant cycles.”

For Colorado, the change in federal funding is a deviation from past years.

According to Kristin Richmann, a spokesperson for Colorado’s Disease Control & Public Health Response Division, the state has historically received its full request. Previously, \$10.6 million went to the Public Health Emergency Preparedness Cooperative Agreement.

This year it got about \$7.9 million.

“While (the) CDC has indicated it may fund the remaining amount at a later date, we must issue grants to sub-recipients based on the funds currently awarded,” she told *The Journal* in an email. “We do not have the authority to make agreements in excess of our existing award amount.”

Beyond Montezuma County, a ripple from the withheld 25% funding reaches outward.

Richmann pointed to impacts on 73 total contracts with the Colorado public health department: “56 local public health agencies, two Tribal Nations, 14 local behavioral health agencies, and one system-level contract.”

Richmann said that the Colorado office became aware of the reduction in funds from the CDC on June 30.

A spokesperson for the CDC told *The Journal* in an email that partial funding was distributed to recipients based on money the agency received for fiscal year 2025. Decisions regarding a second round of awards are planned for Sept. 30, the spokesperson said.

The spokesperson said that the CDC was in communication with other federal agencies to confirm how much will be awarded, and that allotments are “being considered based on funding apportionments for CDC programs.”

Closer to home, Richmann said that the Colorado office is advocating for the funds and working to keep local health agencies prepared for public health challenges.

“Without the full, expected federal allocation, our ability to build and deploy these critical defenses is diminished – requiring adjustments to how we deliver essential public health services.”

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