



First EU Health Task Force Annual Meeting

News

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The establishment of the EU Health Task Force (EUHTF), in alignment with the extended mandate of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), represents a proactive step towards enhancing European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) countries' emergency preparedness and response capabilities. The inaugural meeting of the EUHTF in January 2024 marked a significant milestone in strengthening the EU's preparedness and response capacity to face public health emergencies, considering recent challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Designed to promote awareness and foster a sense of engagement and ownership among EU/EEA countries, the meeting was held at the ECDC premises in Stockholm on 25 and 26 January 2024. The meeting, which lasted two half days and was hosted by ECDC, gathered the EUHTF Coordination Team and EUHTF Advisory Group, together with country representatives from EU/EEA countries and experts from international organisations and initiatives outside of the EU.



The aim was to facilitate communication and networking among participants, share key information on the EUHTF concept, processes and procedures, and discuss how to best reinforce EUHTF's support to countries and strengthen cooperation with different partners to create a collaborative network poised for swift and effective action in preparation and during health crises. The meeting provided a platform for sharing information on the operationalisation of the EUHTF and solicit valuable feedback on the development of the EUHTF's processes, operational priorities, and strategic partnership opportunities.

The EUHTF is composed of a Permanent Capacity (the ECDC Coordination Team), of the EUHTF Expert Pools and of an Enhanced Emergency Capacity. The ECDC Coordination Team is a permanent entity in ECDC responsible for coordinating EUHTF activities. The EUHTF Expert Pools draw resources from EUHTF pools of public health experts put together in the spirit of an EU effort to strengthen health security in the EU/EEA and globally. These experts, who apply to the pool on a voluntary basis and are selected to support specific EUHTF assignments based on their technical competencies, qualifications, experience and availability to deploy, consist of public health experts in ECDC and in the EU/EEA countries, and of fellows during their two-year placement in the ECDC Fellowship Programme (i.e., EPIET, EUPHEM and EPIET-associated Programmes).

Experts within the EUHTF Pools also participate in a community of practice that will regularly update members on EUHTF assignments, offers trainings and fosters the sharing of knowledge and experience between colleagues from different countries. In this framework, regular webinars will be offered to continue building trust and increase engagement within the EUHTF network.

In the event of a declaration of a public health emergency, the EUHTF receives a request by either the European Commission or EU/EEA countries to activate the EUHTF Enhanced Emergency Capacity. This leverages all available resources to the EUHTF to facilitate an appropriate response. The EUHTF Enhanced Emergency Capacity is coordinated by the European Commission and ECDC.

In 2023, the first year of the EUHTF, most requests for assistance were related to preparedness; and only a few requests were received to support response activities to acute public health events. While discussing the reasons behind this, the meeting participants stressed the need to increase awareness about the EUHTF and clarify the scope and the modality of the support offered by the EUHTF.

The need and the ways to strengthen coordination with partners and clarify the role of the EUHTF in the European and global landscape was also discussed in a lively panel, with panellists from France, Portugal, the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Africa CDC, the Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET), a former G7 Presidency country (Germany), the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) Secretariat, WHO Headquarters and the EUHTF Coordination Team.

The meeting was also attended by the members of the EUHTF Advisory Group, the body advising the ECDC Coordination Team on the establishment of EUHTF administrative procedures, its mobilisation framework, and the criteria to participate in the EUHTF Expert Pools. The EUHTF Advisory Group is constituted of members from six EU/EEA countries, from four Directorates-General of the European Commission, the European Medicines Agency, the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the GOARN Secretariat, the European Public Health Association (EUPHA), and Doctors Without Borders (MSF).

The EUHTF Advisory Group will meet in Stockholm in April and November 2024. The meeting in November will be held back-to-back with the next EUHTF stakeholder meeting aimed at informing and receiving feedback and suggestions on the EUHTF *modus operandi* from National Focal Points for preparedness and response of EU/EEA countries, from experts participating in the EUHTF Expert Pools and from international organisations collaborating with the EUHTF.