

# Trump admin illegally retaliated against pandemic whistleblower, reports say



Enlarge / Rick Bright, head of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, listens during a House Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee hearing on Thursday, March 8, 2018. In the background is Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.  
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The Trump administration is facing pressure from a federal watchdog agency to reinstate the whistleblower who President

Trump claimed is “a disgruntled employee who’s trying to help the Democrats win an election.”

Rick Bright, an immunology expert who led the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) until he says he was forced out of his position, reportedly got good news from the US Office of Special Counsel, which is investigating his whistleblower complaint.

“A federal investigative office has found ‘reasonable grounds to believe’ that the Trump administration was retaliating against a whistleblower, Dr. Rick Bright, when he was ousted from a government research agency combating the coronavirus—and said he should be reinstated for 45 days while it investigates, his lawyers said Friday,” The New York Times wrote.

“The lawyers, Debra S. Katz and Lisa J. Banks, said in a statement that they were notified late Thursday afternoon that the Office of Special Counsel, which protects whistleblowers, had ‘made a threshold determination’ that the Department of Health and Human Services ‘violated the Whistleblower Protection Act by removing Dr. Bright from his position because he made protected disclosures in the best interest of the American public,’” the Times story continued.

There’s no direct confirmation from the Office of Special Counsel (OSC), which said it “cannot comment on or confirm the status of open investigations,” according to NPR. A Health and Human Services spokesperson said the agency “strongly disagrees with the allegations and characterizations in the complaint from Dr. Bright.”

Office of Special Counsel recommendations aren’t binding on their own, but the OSC can pursue action that could result in Bright getting his job back. “If the Special Counsel has reasonable grounds to believe that the proposed personnel action is the result of a PPP [prohibited personnel practice],

OSC may ask the federal agency involved to delay the personnel action. If the agency does not agree to a delay, OSC may then file a legal request for a stay with the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) to delay the personnel action,” the OSC says on its website. Investigations can also lead to prosecutions.

Bright is scheduled to testify in a congressional hearing on May 14.

## **Bright said warnings were ignored**

As we wrote this week, Bright’s 89-page whistleblower complaint details how the Trump administration’s COVID-19 response was hampered by cronyism and denial about the virus’s severity. Bright says his early warnings about the pandemic and shortages of critical medical supplies were largely ignored, and that he was transferred to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in a “retaliatory demotion.”

Bright also fought the administration’s push for hydroxychloroquine, a malaria drug President Donald Trump repeatedly promoted as a coronavirus treatment despite a lack of evidence that it would be effective. Trump on Wednesday told reporters that Bright “seems like a disgruntled employee who’s trying to help the Democrats win an election,” according to NPR.

“‘I never met him, I know nothing about him,’ Trump said, adding that he didn’t think ‘disgruntled people’ should work for his administration,” NPR wrote.

Bright joined BARDA in 2010 as head of the Influenza Division International Program, and he was appointed director of BARDA in November 2016 by President Obama. Bright previously worked in the biotech industry and for the CDC, where he focused on avian and human viruses.

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