

Big money flows to US charities fueling vaccine misinformation

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Online Desk: An anti-vaccine group founded by US presidential contender Robert F. Kennedy Jr raised millions of dollars during the coronavirus pandemic, tax records show, boosting its coffers as it ramped up what experts call dangerous health misinformation.

Children's Health Defense (CHD), repeatedly called out for promoting vaccine falsehoods, collected about \$46 million between 2020 and 2022, roughly 10 times its revenue in the three years preceding the pandemic.

CHD and four other non-profit organizations collectively raked in more than \$100 million during that period, public tax records compiled by investigative news site ProPublica show.

The organizations appeared to have capitalized on Covid-19 misinformation that experts say is eroding trust in all jabs and imperiling public health.

The cash influx has helped the groups deepen their political influence by boosting their ability to bankroll legislative and legal efforts to defend misinformation spreaders and weaken vaccine mandates in the United States, experts say.

Much of the donor information is shrouded in secrecy. CHD did not respond to AFP's request for comment.

But the trend illustrates "just how profitable antivax and Covid-19 misinformation and disinformation have been," David Gorski, a professor at Wayne State University School of Medicine, wrote in a blog post.

"It would be one thing if these groups were doing nothing more than selling quackery, but they have become politically influential."

– Misinformation echo chamber –

CHD, which raked in \$23.5 million in 2022 alone, has risen to become one of the world's top "alternative and natural medicine" websites, according to digital intelligence company Similarweb.

Its offerings include daily livestreams, ebooks and newsletters that experts say are sowing doubt about the safety of vaccines.

As revenue surged, so did executive salaries.

Kennedy, a longtime vaccine skeptic, received about \$510,000 in compensation for serving as CHD's chairman in 2022 — more than double his pre-pandemic salary, records show.

The 70-year-old Kennedy is on leave from that role as he pursues his third-party presidential bid.

Under his leadership, the nonprofit group spread falsehoods that were debunked by fact-checkers, including that the Covid-19 shots affect fertility and that infection-induced immunity is superior to vaccination.

AFP has debunked CHD's false claims that Covid-19 vaccines killed millions of people globally and that infant vaccination was linked to high childhood mortality rates.

Experts say those claims contributed to an echo chamber of harmful misinformation about Covid-19, which studies show are raising public fears about other life-saving vaccines, allowing preventable diseases such as measles to make a comeback in the United States.

Other well-funded anti-vaccine groups include Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN), which pulled in \$13.4 million in 2022, compared to just \$1.4 million in 2017, public records show.

The group's founder Del Bigtree, who was hired by Kennedy to be his presidential campaign's communications director, was a vocal critic of masking during the pandemic and touted unproven Covid-19 treatments on his podcast.

ICAN did not respond to a request for comment.

– ‘Blatantly political’ –

The tax-exempt donations to the nonprofits are often anonymized through a popular vehicle known as “donor-advised funds,” which experts say make it difficult to trace the source.

Phil Hackney, a law professor and former official at the Internal Revenue Service, said the groups could be violating the terms of tax-exempt organizations, citing regulations that require the entities to “provide a factual foundation” for their viewpoints.

“These groups are distorting our tax code and genuinely causing harm,” Hackney told AFP.

While charities are not allowed to fund political campaigns, the financial windfall enabled the groups to expand public outreach and spearhead lawsuits against state medical boards.

In January, CHD launched a lawsuit against California's medical board to stop it from punishing physicians accused of spreading Covid-19 misinformation.

CHD has also mobilized its supporters to stage rallies outside state legislatures against public health bills.

Charities including CHD are “heavily involved in legislative efforts to undermine vaccine mandates,” said Dorit Reiss, a law professor at University of California, San Francisco.

Reiss has tracked more than 25 legal actions by CHD since 2019, most of which were dismissed, noting that groups like CHD use the cases to raise funds even when the actions fail.

“These activities are blatantly political,” she told AFP.