

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@washpost.com

The U.S. has experts to fight Zika

In his May 22 Sunday Opinion essay, "Zika is coming, and we're not ready," Ronald A. Klain called for a Public Health Emergency Management Agency. Such an entity already exists: The Public Health Service, which traces its origins to 1798.

Today's Public Health Service, one of our country's seven uniformed services, has a corps of more than 6,600 officers who practice every medical and public-health discipline. They are deployed today in Flint, Mich., where they are working with local authorities on the water problems there. They deployed to Liberia in 2014 and 2015 to fight the deadly Ebola virus. They deploy after every natural and manmade disaster, from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to the mass school shooting in Newtown, Conn., in 2012. They deployed with U.S. military forces to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Public Health Service provides rapid-response teams, some of which can deploy within 12 hours of notification. But they do not have funding to allow them to train for deployments. Unlike the Defense Department, which spends billions of dollars on training each year, PHS officers deploy without being able to work together as teams — because the surgeon general, who oversees and directs these officers, does not have money for training. The surgeon general does not have a line item in the federal budget.

Rather than creating a new organization, why not fund the one that has been around for 218 years?

James T. Currie, Landover

The writer, a colonel, is executive director of the Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service.