

Atlanta Reviews

The David J. Sencer CDC Museum. Louise Shaw, Curator; Mary Hilpertshauser, Historic Collections Manager. Ongoing. <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/index.htm>

As part of the National Council on Public History's 2023 Annual Meeting, attendees could visit Atlanta's David J. Sencer CDC (Center for Disease Control) Museum. The small museum, the only part of the CDC open to the public, is nestled within an urban forest on Emory University's campus yet feels strictly guarded—no large billboards to entice you to enter, a guard stand controlling the park. Upon entering, you are greeted by the museum's "Global Symphony," a patchwork of overlapping wide screen televisions blending images of brightly colored flora with brief interviews from CDC workers on the importance of public health in the twenty-first century. These multimedia vignettes set the tone for your visit. Visitors are controlled, exhibits are neatly arranged, and information on public health topics is contained—both physically limited to small display panels, and ideologically in avoiding heated public health topics such as fatal police violence or restrictions on reproductive health care. The carefully scripted upbeat montage of inspirational speeches by researchers and nurses reminds you that you are in a museum designed to promote American excellence at home and abroad that undoubtedly anchors the rhetoric of its exhibits.

The museum's first floor is dedicated to its current temporary exhibition, "The CDC at 75," celebrating the organization's seventy-fifth anniversary. The exhibit offers a nonlinear history of the organization's public health campaigns, including its disaster response work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the creation of the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control to study how seatbelts save lives, and the organization's eradication measures for measles, diphtheria, and whooping cough. The museum has arranged the exhibition around disparate primary sources, most notably posters and technical objects, that drop into moments in America's public health history. In a section on sexually transmitted diseases, for example, you'll find a bactronic colony counter that was used in the study of gonorrhea. In the back corner, you'll find a Whirlpool air respirator created out of plastic bags—created at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when personal protective equipment was in short supply. As with the rest of the museum, the museum's discussion of these topics is emotionally detached. While many archives have sought to create space for the public to share their own stories about COVID, such as the University of Utah's and IUPUI's community archiving projects, this museum remains focused on everything but the emotional toll of public health policy and action on Americans' lives.



The museum and archives feature many machines that illuminate public health issues from the past including a cigarette test machine and this working Iron Lung that visitors are able to touch. (Photograph by author)

The CDC museum's permanent exhibition, found on the lowest level, offers a broad overview of public health in American history and, most importantly, introduces some public health controversies in America's past. In a section on public health policies regarding immigration, the display features a wooden intelligence test kit from 1915 used to test immigrants and also includes a photo from Angel Island that acknowledges how Asian immigrants suffered from stricter

medical testing because they were stigmatized as disease carriers. In an adjacent section, a World War II-era map on malaria-controlled areas in the US is juxtaposed with a hand-held DDT insecticide sprayer—the descriptive plaque noting that Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* lambasted DDT as a destructive force to humans and their ecologies. Finally, one panel features documents on the Tuskegee Study, including a memorandum from the assistant secretary for health shutting down the study and a photograph of President Bill Clinton apologizing to survivors. The panel focuses attention on how shutting down the unethical study resulted in improvements in medical research, yet completely avoids the topic of systemic racism and racialized health disparities that continue to impact the health of African Americans in the South.

HIV and global health figure prominently in the exhibitions. The exhibition’s AIDS collection features a small array of primary sources, from magazine covers and posters to some rare documents including a cluster worksheet draft diagramming “Patient Zero’s” sexual relations. The exhibit demonstrates the wide impact of this virus, from the creation and use of new technologies such as a body fluids barrier kit and biohazard disposal container, to graphics designed to combat complacency for marginalized groups such as queer Asians and pregnant women. The museum especially uses posters and photographs to promote the US government’s proactive work on global public health, including smallpox vaccination posters from West Africa, Bangladesh, and Nigeria, with video footage of vaccination efforts in Tonga in 1964. The presentation of these artifacts portrays America as a diverse, inclusive, and globally connected country that often leans into a “savior mentality” tone that largely avoids interrogating an intersectional analysis of health disparities. Display descriptions often laud the corporations that designed certain health technologies while avoiding discussing unequal access to them.

One of the museum’s greatest strengths is its collection of public health campaign posters that inundate the collection, including posters on anti-smoking, immunizations, sun protection, and more, that are scattered throughout the museum. Perhaps the most eye-catching poster in the collection was actually created as a protest against the CDC by ACT UP’s art collective Gran Fury. Designed in the style of the CDC’s public health media, the poster admonished the organization’s lack of attention to women with the headline, “WOMEN DON’T GET AIDS. THEY JUST DIE FROM IT.” Despite the effectiveness of the ACT UP material, however, overall the interpretation of AIDS and other issues appears to be stuck in the 1990s. Even the museum’s unique display on the Atlanta Child Murders of 1980 (which the CDC investigated as a public health issue, leading to the creation of the CDC’s Violence Epidemiology Branch), fails to connect the topic to contemporary analysis of histories of violence—of the multi-decade escalation of school shootings, the ongoing surge of hate crimes against Black trans women, or even the prevalence of domestic abuse—perhaps in an effort to remain nonpartisan. In short, the museum does not reflect the cutting-edge research published in the medical humanities published over the past two decades.



Photo during our curated tour of the David J. Sencer CDC Museum. The image shows our group in front of a poster by Gran Fury (ACT UP), “WOMEN DON’T GET AIDS. THEY JUST DIE FROM IT,” designed by ACT UP/DC Women’s Committee, for the Department of Health and Human Services Demonstration, 1990. (Photograph by author)

Where the museum acknowledges the present and future of public health is in its innovative K-12 public health educational programs, including an annual Disease Detective Camp and an online summer course that both create opportunities for students to study how diseases spread. The museum also features interactive worksheets at multiple grade levels, from scavenger hunts to critical thinking quizzes. These worksheets are complemented by STEM lessons that the museum provides online for educators and students on epidemiology, the scientific method, and the design process. This interest in youth involvement in public health is echoed in the museum's mini exhibit on graphic designs targeting kids for COVID-19 vaccinations as part of its "campaign to build vaccine confidence." The exhibit features organizations across the country dedicated to creating art focused on COVID-19 resilience, including South Dakota's Barn Quilt Project that used cross-cultural quilting traditions to encourage locals to share stories about their COVID experiences. These artist coalitions feature numerous artists of color seeking to spread public health awareness to their own communities in visual styles that move beyond the CDC's use of, at times, shame or fear-driven public health campaigns. Massachusetts's Trust Transfer Project, which has worked with 150 artists and 75 faith organizations to promote vaccine confidence, features paintings by and for Latinx and African American New Englanders, including a scene in a Black barbershop, as part of their "hope to heal" campaign. These artistic creations that blend science, politics, art, and personal experiences demonstrate wide interest in creative approaches to public health that center community-building. Perhaps the younger generations that the CDC is seeking to recruit will take a greater role in shaping the CDC Museum to tell more vivid and interactive stories linking America's past role in public health to contemporary experiences and imagined futures for this important field.

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The Owens-Thomas House & Slave Quarters. Benjamin Simons, Telfair Museums Executive Director and CEO; Shannon Browning-Mullins, Project Director. November 17, 2018–Ongoing. <https://www.telfair.org/>

The Owens-Thomas House & Slave Quarters sits off Oglethorpe Square in Savannah, Georgia, about a half-mile from River Street, the famously cobbled street teeming with tourists. It is part of the Telfair Museums group, which includes the Telfair Academy and the Jepson Center. The house and its outbuildings were constructed by enslaved laborers in 1819 for merchant Richard Richardson. After the house changed hands several times in the 1820s, in 1830 attorney and politician George Welshman Owens purchased the home. The property remained in the Owens family until Margaret Gray Thomas, a granddaughter of George Owens,