



1600 20th Street, NW • Washington, D.C. 20009 • 202/588-1000 • www.citizen.org

Public Citizen' Statement for the Record
United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Hearing on the Nomination of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. to serve as Secretary of Health and Human Services

January 28, 2025

Introduction:

Public Citizen is a 54-year-old nonprofit advocacy organization with 500,000 members and supporters around the country. We champion the public interest in the halls of power. We use strategic lobbying, aggressive litigation, in-depth research, coalition-building and savvy grassroots organizing to push for bold, transformative change – ensuring that our government and economy works for the people, not just for corporations or the wealthy and well-connected few.

Public Citizen respectfully submits testimony to the Committee on behalf of our members and supporters in opposition to the nomination of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. for the role of Secretary of Health and Human Services. The mission of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is to enhance and protect the health and well-being of all Americans. Among other critical functions, agencies operating within the Department protect Americans from unsafe and ineffective prescription drugs and medical devices, work to prevent and fight disease and provide trusted information and tools to help communities stay healthy, and oversee the Medicare and Medicaid programs. Installing as Secretary of HHS an individual, like Kennedy, who has regularly promoted conspiracy theories and spread anti-science views would threaten the lives of people throughout the country and the globe.

Kennedy's anti-public health and anti-science views:

Kennedy has an established track record of taking dangerous anti-public health and anti-science views and we can expect that he would use his elevated platform in this role to spread his dangerous anti-science views. Since being nominated to head HHS, Kennedy has reportedly backed away from some of the most vitriolic antivax rhetoric.ⁱ Senators must weigh the credulity of these statements against his long history contributing to the dangerous rise of vaccine skepticism in the United States and around the world.

Kennedy's promotion of vaccine skepticism and disinformation as a private citizen has proved to be deadly; as HHS Secretary it would be catastrophic. In 2019, an outbreak of measles in Samoa infected more than 5,000 people, 83 of whom died. Samoa's health agency cited Kennedy's visit months earlier – during which he spread antivax rhetoric and exacerbated vaccine hesitancy at a crucial moment – as a contributing factor.ⁱⁱ

In 2020, through Operation Warp Speed, the Department of Health and Human Services was critical in spurring and accelerating development of vaccines for COVID-19 that saved millions of lives.^{iii,iv} The success of Operation Warp Speed depended on many years of U.S. government investments in infectious disease research and the tireless work of scientists at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and universities.^v COVID-19 demonstrated the importance U.S. public health leadership, especially within HHS, yet rather than heeding this lesson, Kennedy has publicly pledged to fire hundreds of NIH scientists and stop research on drug development and infectious disease, “giving them a break for about eight years.”^{vi,vii,viii}

Kennedy petitioned the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to revoke authorization of COVID-19 vaccines in May 2021, while they were in high demand and the deadly “Delta” coronavirus variant was on its way to becoming dominant in the United States. Instead of supporting vaccines proven to have already saved hundreds of thousands of lives, Kennedy promoted racist conspiracy theories, became a superspreader of vaccine misinformation on social media and promoted drugs as treatments for COVID-19 that studies demonstrated to be ineffective.^{ix,x,xi}

In addition to spouting vaccine disinformation, Kennedy has perpetuated skepticism of the established scientific fact that the HIV virus causes AIDS.^{xii} He has made baseless claims that environmental chemical exposure causes children to become gay or transgender.^{xiii} While Kennedy’s criticisms of Big Pharma rightfully strike a nerve with the American public (and echo some critiques that Public Citizen has long made), instead of strengthening scientific standards at the FDA, we have every reason to believe that Kennedy’s approach would instead rely on lowering standards and disregarding science in order to tout and perhaps approve unproven medications and treatments.

Conclusion:

There are simply too many examples of anti-public health views to include in one statement.^{xiv} The bottom line is that Kennedy’s anti-science views are disqualifying for him to serve as the top public health official in the nation.

Already, in the first week since taking office, the Trump Administration has taken actions that recklessly threaten public health. The Trump Administration cancelled a series of scientific meetings and ordered federal health officials to cease public communications, which has already deprived the public of information on the spread of bird flu on America’s farms.^{xv} It has pulled down key guidance information from the website of the FDA, undermining agency efforts to ensure the drugs and devices it regulates meet the needs of Americans.^{xvi} It has cancelled meetings at NIH necessary for it to make grants to universities and researchers that undergird biomedical innovation.^{xvii} It has initiated processes to remove the United States from the World Health Organization (WHO), which already has brought to a halt collaborations between the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and WHO that help to fight health threats.^{xviii} If these actions portend how a Kennedy-led HHS would conduct itself – and it seems unlikely these moves would have occurred without Kennedy’s agreement – then the danger may be even greater than Kennedy’s statements suggest.

We urge senators to oppose Kennedy’s nomination as HHS chief.

ⁱ <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2025/01/even-some-rfk-jr-allies-are-worried-about-his-vaccine-agenda-00200364>

-
- ii <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/25/opinion/rfk-jr-vaccines-samoa-measles.html>
- iii <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8426978/>
- iv <https://medicalcountermeasures.gov/barda/barda-covid-19-response/timeline/#event-bardaacovid-19aresponseatimeline>
- v <https://www.citizen.org/article/leading-covid-19-vaccines-depend-on-nih-technology/>
- vi <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/11/robert-f-kennedy-jr-national-institutes-of-health/>
- vii <https://x.com/JacobRubashkin/status/1803974935091761518>
- viii <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/rfk-jr-comes-home-anti-vaccine-group-commits-break-us-infectious-disea-rcna123551>
- ix <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0mzk2y41zvo>
- x <https://apnews.com/article/robert-f-kennedy-vaccines-trump-rfkjr-7f8dcb25de76a5a70710d22bbc63f6fa>
- xi <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/rfk-jr-health-stances-vaccines-fluoride-raw-milk-rcna180244>
- xii <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/robert-f-kennedy-jr-2024-presidential-campaign-democratic-primary.html>
- xiii <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/13/politics/robert-kennedy-jr-chemicals-water-children-frogs/index.html>
- xiv <https://www.nytimes.com/article/rfk-conspiracy-theories-fact-check.html>
- xv <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/22/health/trump-health-communications.html>
- xvi <https://www.statnews.com/2025/01/24/trump-restrictions-dei-communications-health-and-science-agencies-nih-cdc-fda/>
- xvii **Ibid.**
- xviii <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2025/01/cdc-halts-collaboration-with-who-pending-further-guidance-00200766>