

January 30, 2025

Senate Committee on Finance Hearing on Robert F. Kennedy Nomination for HHS Secretary

On Wednesday (January 29), the Senate Finance Committee held a hearing on President Trump's nomination of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. for Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). During the hearing, Chairman Mike Crapo (R-ID) and other Republicans voiced confidence in Mr. Kennedy and his Senate confirmation. Chair Crapo said, "He deserved to be confirmed," while many Democrats questioned whether Mr. Kennedy was the right candidate to lead HHS. The dominant themes throughout the hearing were addressing chronic conditions through improved diet and Mr. Kennedy's position on vaccines.

- For more information: <https://www.finance.senate.gov/hearings/hearingto-consider-the-nomination-of-robert-f-kennedy-jr-of-california-to-be-secretary-of-health-and-human-services>

Opening statements

Chairman Mike Crapo (R-ID): In his statement, Chairman Crapo described the challenges patients encounter when navigating the US health care system, adding that while spending rises, outcomes for many conditions decline. He said, "Mr. Kennedy, if confirmed, you will have the opportunity to chart a new and better course for the federal approach to tackling both the drivers and the consequences of our ailing health care system." He praised Mr. Kennedy's "commitment to combating chronic conditions that drive health care costs" and for his "advocacy for health care transparency." He concluded, "Regardless of political party, everyone in this room shares a common recognition that our current system has fallen short—as well as a common desire to make our country healthier." [Full Statement.](#)

Ranking Member Ron Wyden (D-OR): In his statement, ranking member Wyden said, "After a careful review of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s statements, actions, associations and views, I have reached the conclusion that he should not be entrusted with the health and well-being of the American people." He criticized Mr. Kennedy's views on vaccines, saying he has "embraced conspiracy theories, quacks, and charlatans." He further criticized Mr. Kennedy of changing his views on other health care matters like abortion and universal health care, saying it makes it "nearly impossible to know where he stands." He criticized Mr. Kennedy's past statements on wanting to "pause infectious disease research for eight years" and said Mr. Kennedy is unprepared to handle the effects of Republican proposals to cut Medicaid spending. [Full Statement.](#)

Witness testimony

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., nominee to be Secretary of Health and Human Services: In his testimony, Mr. Kennedy said his journey to health care began as an environmental lawyer, learning how chemicals that harm fish can also harm humans. He said that despite paying "far more," the US has "worse health than any other developed nation," noting that over half of Americans are chronically ill. He said President Trump has embraced and elevated

the Make America Healthy Again movement, adding that if confirmed, “I will do everything in my power to put the health of Americans back on track.” Mr. Kennedy said the best place to start is combating chronic disease, which he said has “no single culprit.” Referencing media reports on his positions, Mr. Kennedy said he is not anti-vaccine or anti-industry, he is “pro-safety,” adding, “All of my kids are vaccinated, and I believe vaccines have a critical role in healthcare.” In addition, Mr. Kennedy said he is not “the enemy of food producers.” If confirmed, he concluded, “we will make sure our tax dollars support healthy foods. We will scrutinize the chemical additives in our food supply. We will remove the financial conflicts of interest in our agencies. We will create an honest, unbiased, science-driven HHS, accountable to the President, to Congress, and to the American people.” [Full Testimony.](#)

Q&A

Chairman Crapo asked Mr. Kennedy about his passion for nutrition-oriented disease prevention. Mr. Kennedy described how the prevalence of diabetes, autism, and autoimmune diseases has risen within his lifetime, calling the current chronic disease rates a national security issue, as well as a spiritual and moral issue. Mr. Kennedy spoke in favor of restricting processed foods and sugary drinks from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and school lunch programs, as well as reforming Medicare and Medicaid to focus on outcomes-based medicine and give beneficiaries more accountability for their care. In addition, he said NIH and FDA should research the link between chronic disease and food additives.

Ranking member Wyden entered into the record a letter from Caroline Kennedy, Mr. Kennedy’s cousin and previous US ambassador to Australia and Japan, who outlined Mr. Kennedy’s “lack of personal fitness for the office.” Wyden focused his comments on Mr. Kennedy’s conflicting statements on vaccines, particularly his stance on the measles and the measles vaccine. Wyden also connected Mr. Kennedy to a deadly measles outbreak in Samoa, which Mr. Kennedy pushed back on the timeline of events and clarifying that his visit to Samoa was not related to vaccines. In the exchange, Mr. Kennedy reiterated that he supports the measles vaccine and the polio vaccine, and if confirmed, would do nothing that discourages people from receiving them. Mr. Kennedy also said many of his previous comments on vaccine had been taken out of context and he has corrected statements in which he was unable to finish his sentences. Wyden concluded saying, “That’s not true,” saying his book on measles states that parents have been misled into believing that measles is a deadly disease.

Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) spoke about the need for HHS to comply with congressional oversight requests, reforms to hold pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) accountable and lower drug prices, legislation to require price disclosure on TV drug advertisements, addressing rural health needs, transparency into conflicts of interest at the Dietary Guidelines Advisory committee, and challenges with HHS’ Office of Refugee Resettlement’s handling of unaccompanied children. Mr. Kennedy said he agreed with each point, and if confirmed, his approach to administration will be “radical transparency.”

Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-WA) raised concerns about Mr. Kennedy’s statements on medical research and the implications for NIH employees and medical innovation. Mr. Kennedy said right now NIH prioritizes research on infectious disease, while chronic disease accounts for 92% of the deaths in the US and he wants to address that funding disparity. He said he would protect stem cell research but added it shouldn’t be done using fetal tissue. When asked about how to address PBMs, Mr. Kennedy mentioned the Senate Finance Committee’s Modernizing

and Ensuring PBM Accountability. Sen. Cantwell encouraged Mr. Kennedy to also read the Senate Commerce Science, and Transportation Committee's PBM legislation, the Pharmacy Benefit Manager Transparency Act.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) spoke about the need for HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement to locate the unaccompanied minors that have been placed with sponsors, as well as the need to train primary care physicians in patient-centered care that integrates behavioral health. Mr. Kennedy agreed, committing to locating those children and speaking of his personal connection to substance misuse and the need to intervene at the right moment. Sen. Cornyn also asked Mr. Kennedy if he supports the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), specifically citing the US' role as a global leader in providing lifesaving antiviral drugs to stop the spread of HIV in Africa and other countries.

Sen. Michael F. Bennet (D-CO) said that he agreed with Mr. Kennedy that the US must address nutrition and food quality to combat chronic conditions like diabetes and must address the mental health epidemic but he questioned whether Mr. Kennedy was the best candidate for the job, saying he has spent decades peddling in half-truths, false statements, and theories regarding vaccines. He asked Mr. Kennedy to confirm if he said that "COVID-19 was a genetically engineered bioweapon that targets black and white people, but spared Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people." Mr. Kennedy said he was quoting an NIH study. When asked if he called Lyme disease a highly likely materially engineered bioweapon, Mr. Kennedy said, "I probably did say that." Sen. Bennet also asked about Mr. Kennedy's past statements suggesting abortion care should be decided by the woman and not the states.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) spoke critically of Mr. Kennedy's past statements on vaccines and the impact they have on vaccination rates. He also spoke critically of CMS bureaucracy, saying that Rhode Island providers are paid less than those in Massachusetts and Connecticut and that the agency has denied Rhode Island waivers and tried to remove a Rhode Island accountable care organization from the Medicare Shared Savings Program. Whitehouse critically about government involvement in late-term abortions, sharing experiences of Rhode Island OB-GYNs who describe the life-threatening circumstances in which such procedures are needed to save the life of the mother. Mr. Kennedy said if confirmed he would work with the senator to create new pilot programs that improve care in his state.

Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA) focused his comments on Medicaid and Medicare, asking about ways to better serve the dual eligible program and improve Medicaid. Mr. Kennedy said, "Medicaid is not working for Americans" and noted that it has expanded beyond the poorest Americans. He also mentioned telemedicine, AI, and the need to experiment with pilot programs on value-based care and direct primary care systems. When asked how he would better integrate care for dual eligibles, Mr. Kennedy incorrectly said the program is "fully paid for by the federal government" and struggled to describe other health care funding mechanisms. Sen. Cassidy also asked about ways to make people more accountable for their care whether patients should be enrolled in traditional Medicare or Medicare Advantage to which Mr. Kennedy said he believed more people would enroll in MA if they could afford it and spoke about cooperatives, health savings accounts, and other services that would increase accountability.

Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-VA) spoke favorably of Medicaid and asked if he supports the White House's effort to freeze federal communications and funding, which he noted has impacted programs beyond Medicare and Social Security. Sen. Warner also asked Mr. Kennedy which HHS offices he would target in his planned staffing cuts. In response, Mr. Kennedy said he would change the same employees that President Biden did. When pressed further

on staff working on food safety and cyberattacks, Mr. Kennedy said, "I will commit, (to) not firing anybody who's doing their job." After a back and forth over the impact of the freeze, Mr. Warner said, "I don't feel like you approach this job with the knowledge" and said his answers were "very disappointing."

Sen. James Lankford (R-OK) asked how Mr. Kennedy would approach Title X and abortion care, as well as conscience protections. Mr. Kennedy said he would support President Trump's policies and said he agrees with President Trump that abortion should be decided by the states. In response to the question on conscience protections, Mr. Kennedy said that "we need to respect each other when we have different opinions." In response to a separate question on FDA's approach to mifepristone, Mr. Kennedy said he would ensure FDA examines all safety issues.

Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) addressed concerns she heard regarding Medicaid, stating how it is funded, the role Medicaid plays in covering disabled children, and how Medicaid expansion has helped people with chronic illness re-enter the workforce and transition to private coverage. She spoke critically of his past statements on vaccines and expressed concerns that as Secretary he would advise people against vaccination. She also asked him to confirm previous pro-life statements, which he confirmed. When asked when he changed his position, Mr. Kennedy replied, "Senator, I agree with President Trump that every abortion is a tragedy." Sen. Hassan criticized his response saying that it suggests "regardless of what you believe, regardless of what values you have, if President Trump tells you to do something, you're going to do it." She also criticized the federal funding freeze, stating that the White House only issued a statement saying Medicaid would not be affected after Democrats pointed out the "damage" of the policy.

Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) asked Mr. Kennedy about enforcing the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA) when it comes to emergent abortion cases. As an example, she asked whether a woman experiencing life threatening bleeding from an incomplete miscarriage that a doctor determines requires an emergency abortion has the same legal right to emergency care, as a woman who presents at an emergency room experiencing a heart attack, even though they live in a state where abortion is banned. Mr. Kennedy said he was not sure and that he believed he only had budgetary authority. Sen. Cortez-Masto explained that CMS and the HHS Office of Inspector General are tasked with investigating potential EMTALA violations. When the senator asked about Mr. Kennedy's commitment to implementing the Inflation Reduction Act's drug price negotiation program, he said he believed President Trump had signed an executive order today supporting the program and said he has seen a summary of the order. *(Note: As of the time of publishing, no EO has been issued, but CMS issued a [statement](#) today saying CMS intends to provide opportunities for stakeholders to provide ideas to improve the program.)* Sen. Cortez Masto reiterated Sen. Hassan's concerns that Kennedy would "rubber stamp" anything for the administration. Mr. Kennedy said Trump selected him as he is uniquely positioned to address the chronic disease epidemic.

Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT) spoke favorably of Mr. Kennedy and applauding him for taking a science-based approach. He asked if Mr. Kennedy would commit to working with the US Department of Agriculture before implementing policies that would impact farmers and ranchers. Mr. Kennedy agreed. Sen. Daines also asked Mr. Kennedy to commit to working with the FDA to review changes to mifepristone. Mr. Kennedy said he has committed to studying the safety and said when President Trump takes a position on how to regulate mifepristone he would implement it.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) asked Mr. Kennedy to commit to not accepting any compensation from a drug company, a medical device company, a hospital system, or an insurer for at least four years after his time at HHS. Mr. Kennedy agreed. Sen. Warren then noted that Mr. Kennedy has made \$2.5 million encouraging people to join lawsuits filed by Wisner Baum law firm against vaccine manufacturers and asked him to commit to not take any compensation from lawsuits against drug companies while he is Secretary and for four years after. Mr. Kennedy had several exchanges with the senator but ultimately would not agree to not sue companies. He said, "I support vaccines. I will support the childhood schedule ... The only thing I want is good science." Chair Crapo ultimately, interrupted the exchange, at which time Sen. Warren asked, "Have we had a single nominee come through who's made two and a half million dollars off suing one of the entities that it would be regulating and plans to keep getting a take of every lawsuit in the future?" Sen. Crapo said the Office of Government Ethics conducts a thorough review and that Mr. Kennedy has complied with all requirements. Sen. Warren later spoke about the Samoa incident and Kennedy reaffirmed his position that he did not impact the incident.

Sen. Todd Young (R-IN) asked Mr. Kennedy to describe "gold standard" of medical research. He said it is replicable science that is based on completely transparent health data. Young asked how Mr. Kennedy would work to regain public trust in federal public health agencies. Mr. Kennedy said "radical transparency." Mr. Young also spoke about the need to accelerate research into long-term COVID research and Mr. Kennedy committed to accelerating that research. The senator then asked how he would balance personal priorities of addressing chronic disease and other critical work within HHS, such as incentivizing and advancing innovation in medicine and pharmaceuticals. Mr. Kennedy said AI and telemedicine will play roles in advancing innovation moving forward.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (D-VT) said he strongly agrees with the effort to Make America Healthy Again. He asked Mr. Kennedy if the US should provide universal health care. Mr. Kennedy declined to answer. Sen. Sanders then asked if health care is a human right? Mr. Kennedy said it differs from other rights because there is a cost attached. The senator then asked if he'd support legislation to ensure the US does not pay more for prescription drugs than other developed nations? Mr. Kennedy said he supports proposals to "equalize it" and end the disparity. When asked if he believes climate change is real, Mr. Kennedy said he and President Trump agreed to disagree on that issue and that he is tasked with making Americans healthy again. Sen. Sanders also criticized Mr. Kennedy for his conflicting statements on abortion and had an exchange with Kennedy over infant onesies sold by a group Mr. Kennedy founded that contain anti-vaccine language.

Sen. John Barrasso (R-WY) asked Mr. Kennedy to commit to addressing the challenges affecting rural health care. Mr. Kennedy agreed and said in his nearly 60 visits with senators two issues stood out as common threads for both Democrats and Republicans: pharmacy benefit manager reform and rural hospital closures. He said, "President Trump is determined to end the hemorrhage of rural hospitals, and he's asked me to do that, through the use of AI and telemedicine." He said, "Cleveland Clinic has developed an AI nurse that you cannot distinguish from a human being that has diagnostics, as good as any doctor." Sen. Barrasso also asked Mr. Kennedy to commit to fixing the Biden administration's nurse staffing rule, which he said will cause nursing home closures in rural areas. Mr. Kennedy said yes, saying while "well intentioned," the rule would be a "disaster" for rural areas.

Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) said she has "no doubt" that Mr. Kennedy will be confirmed and will do a "solid job for the people of this country." She asked Mr. Kennedy to commit to working with his CMS administrator to ensure the Medicare wage index is balanced and fair to rural areas. Mr. Kennedy agreed and said CMS administrator

nominee Dr. Mehmet Oz also recognizes the rural health care crisis. She also asked Mr. Kennedy to commit overseeing prescribing practices of ADHD medication and promoting alternative treatments for youth, noting that her state's Medicaid program spent \$90 million on ADHD in 2024. Mr. Kennedy said the US is over medicating children and the entire population. He said, "A recent study by Cochrane Collaboration founder Peter Ghosh found that pharmaceutical drugs are the third cause largest cause of death in our country after heart attacks and cancers." Instead of more pharmaceuticals, he said we need "community health initiatives, we may need access to treatment, we need exercise, we need better food." Sen. Blackburn also discussed the Medicaid prohibition on institutions for mental disease and said she would submit questions on PBM reform and AI.

Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN) said based on the day's discussion she was concerned about future access to mifepristone. Sen. Smith and Mr. Kennedy engaged in a back-and-forth about his past comments linking school shooters with anti-depressants. Mr. Kennedy said there is not enough evidence and said the science needs to look at all things, including social media and video games. Sen. Smith shared her own personal experience with antidepressants and cautioned Mr. Kennedy against spreading lies and misinformation as they reinforce a stigma that harms people. Later, Sen. Smith spoke about the avian flu outbreak and asked whether he would give research on bird flu a break. He said he would devote the "appropriate research."

Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) spoke favorably of Mr. Kennedy and commended him for putting political differences aside and working with President Trump to address chronic illness. He submitted into the record 11 letters of support from 63,000 people, including doctors. He criticized the Biden administration's response to oversight inquiries and asked Mr. Kennedy to commit to transparency if confirmed. Mr. Kennedy said his approach will be "radical transparency." He said he has written six books about federal health agencies and that he knows "a lot about them" and "how to fix it."

Sen. Ben Luján (D-NM) asked Mr. Kennedy a series of questions related to Medicaid. He spoke favorably of the Medicaid program and countered Mr. Kennedy's previous statement that it is unpopular. Mr. Kennedy said he views Medicaid as a "critical program" but believes it is not working as intended. He said, "The premiums are too high. The deductibles are too high. And everybody's getting sick or too much money is going to insurance industry." *Note: Not all Medicaid beneficiaries pay premiums and most do not have deductibles.* When asked if he would cut Medicaid, Mr. Kennedy said that would be up to Congress. The senator also asked about state Medicaid expansion roll backs that would be triggered by a drop to the FMAP and the importance of including Native Americans in medical research. Mr. Kennedy also committed to finalizing congressionally mandated FDA guidance to increase clinical trial diversity.

Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC) asked Mr. Kennedy to reaffirm his commitment to following President Trump's policy on Title X. Mr. Kennedy agreed. The senator spoke about improving the school health program, reforming Medicaid, his support for the CARES Act. He also asked Mr. Kennedy about his support for scientists at federal health agencies and Operation Warp Speed. Mr. Kennedy said, "I want to empower scientists, I want to make sure that science is unobstructed by vested or economic interests." He called Operation Warp Speed an "extraordinary accomplishment, demonstration of leadership by President Trump," but said the Biden administration narrowed the focus.

Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-GA) focused his comments on the CDC, which is located in Georgia, and asked Mr. Kennedy to verify past statements, critical of the agency. Mr. Kennedy objected to one claim that he compared the CDC to Nazi death camps. He explained he was “comparing the injury rate to our children to other atrocities” after reading a congressional committee report that said the CDC’s immunization safety office placed “institutional self-interests and pharmaceutical profits” over the welfare and health of children. The senator also asked if Mr. Kennedy agrees with the federal employee buyouts and whether he supports extending the enhanced subsidies to purchase exchange coverage. Mr. Kennedy said the subsidies are Congress’ decision.

Sen. Peter Welch (D-VT) spoke critically of Mr. Kennedy raising concerns that his “willingness to disrupt and maybe break rules is going to be dangerous and destructive.” He spoke critically of President Trump’s order to halt federal funding.

Sen. Roger Marshall (R-KS) asked Mr. Kennedy how he will Make America Health Again. Mr. Kennedy said the number one thing it to fix our food supply. He said, “We have 10,000 ingredients in our country in our foods, Europeans have only 400.” Mr. Kennedy also acknowledged that if confirmed he would not regulate farms, but he hoped to work closely with USDA and the farmer community on these issues.

If you have questions, please contact [Heather Meade](#) or [Heather Bell](#).

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